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Fantasy & Science Fiction

JUNE

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by Richard Cowper

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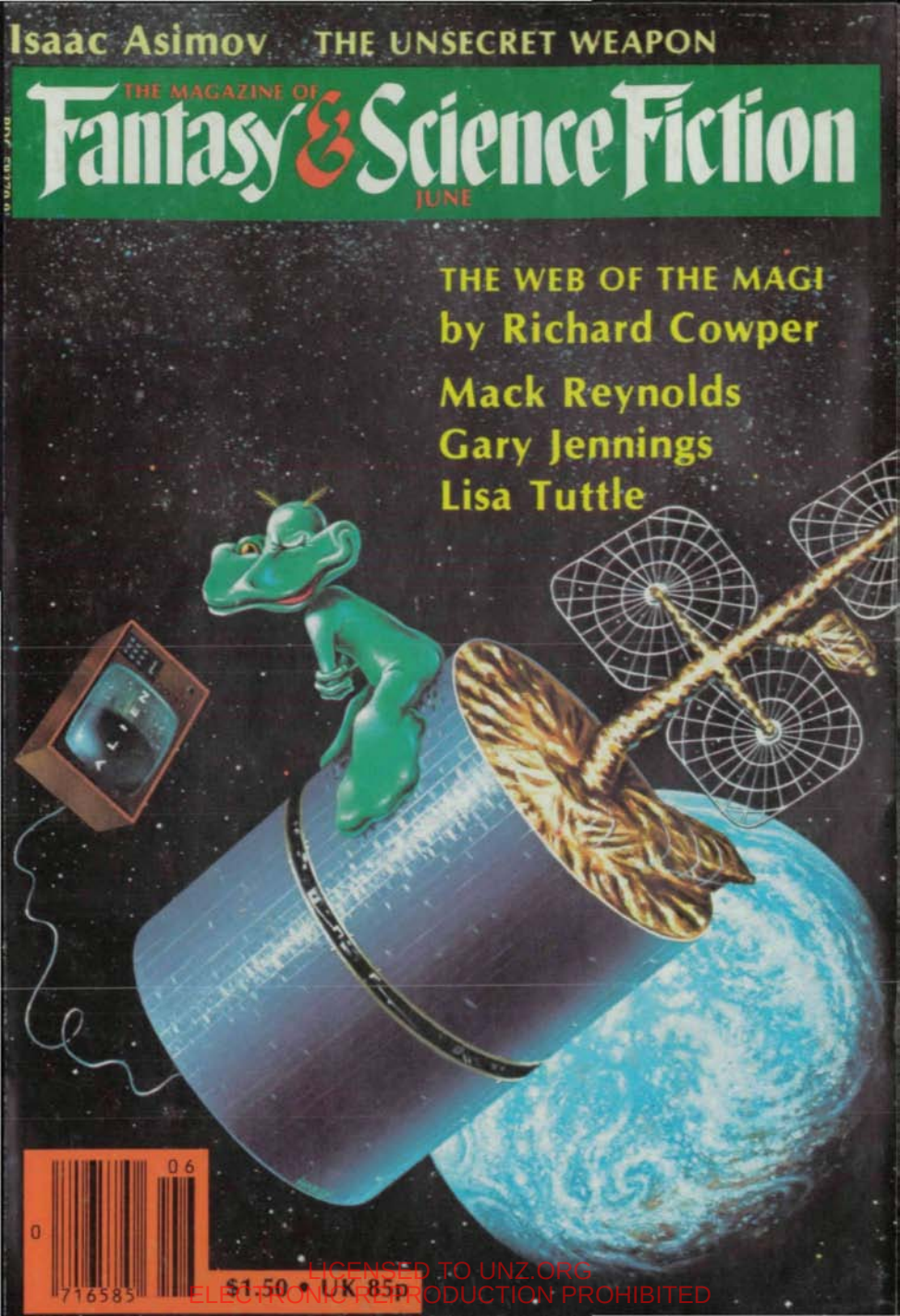

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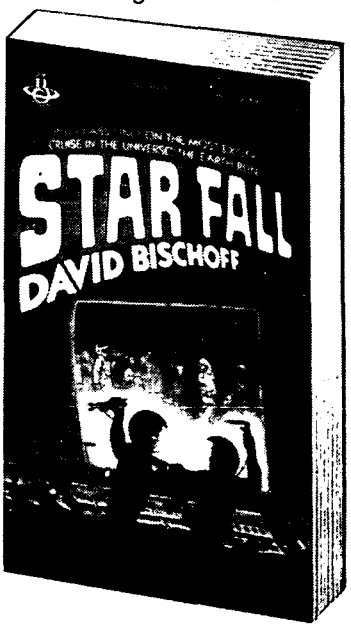

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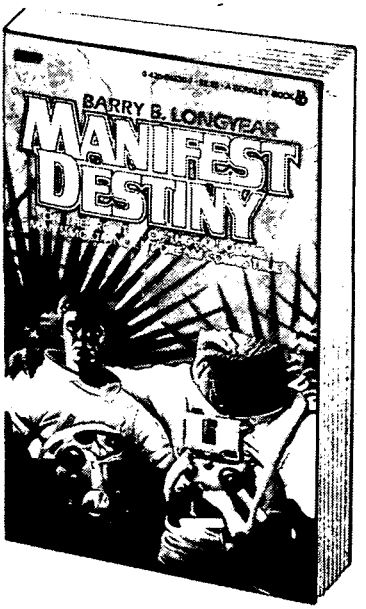

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Fantasy & Science Fiction

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JUNE • 31st Year of Publication

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Richard Cowper's last story here was "Out There Where the Big Ships Go" (August 1979); his latest novel is THE ROAD TO CORLAY (Pocket Books). We have come to expect a great deal from a Cowper story: totally fresh ideas, gripping narratives and polished prose; and this new novella is guaranteed not to disappoint. It concerns a British officer who is mapping a telegraph route through a Persian mountain range and who makes an incredible discovery in an isolated, snowy valley.

The Web of the Magi

BY
RICHARD COWPER

I approached Khar-i-Babek at sundown on a cold Tuesday in November, 1886. Since the end of August, I had been engaged on the preparation of a Preliminary Survey for the electric telegraph link which is to connect Isfahan with the central Baluchistan-Karachi system. My orders were to map the most feasible route through the Zagros.

It began to snow as we prepared to pitch camp. Wall-eyed Jamshid set about coaxing a fire out of dried dung and thorn twigs while his brother Parviz hobbled the mules and assisted me to erect the tent in the shelter of an outcrop of sandstone. Both scoundrels appeared surly and ill at ease, an effect which I ascribed to the inclement conditions. However, when I taxed them with it, they muttered that the place was well-known to be *djinni*, an observation to which, as Sir R—B—would surely agree, the Occident has no truly adequate response.

At about seven o'clock the wind began to rise. By then it was snowing steadily — a fine, powdery precipitation which every now and again the gusts contrived to force through the ventilation louvre in the roof of the tent. It descended upon our heads like puffs of ash as we sat huddled around the brazier, dipping our fingers into the brass dish of lukewarm rice. The meal over, I was moved to offer each of them one of my precious *bhandi* cheroots and would, indeed, have shared the remaining contents of my brandy flask with them had they not flung up their hands in concerted and well-simulated horror at so impious a suggestion. Knowing full well how they had responded to similar invitations on previous occasions, I was able to indulge in a little quiet amusement at their expense.

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I was intrigued to observe how, every so often, one or other of them would incline his head as though he were listening to some noise outside. I asked Parviz whether it was the mules they were concerned about, but he shook his head and muttered something in the *Pushtu* dialect that I could not catch.

Having trimmed the lantern, I settled to my nightly task of writing up my log and transferring the day's topographical observations from my field notes to the Russian Imperial map which Colonel Mallows had obtained for me. It was, I suppose, better than nothing, but not much. Already it was becoming evident that I had now climbed well above Major Bobroff's first-hand observations which, for all practical purposes, can be said to have ended at Persepolis. I was coming to the inescapable conclusion that many thousands of square miles between Shiraz and Kerman could well be designated *Terra Incognita*. Yet the terrain, though hardly hospitable, is, I hazard, by no means impossible; and the establishment of a telegraph link between Isfahan and Baluchistan is, unquestionably, of prime military importance.

I finished writing up my log and had just set out my pens and colored inks preparatory to commencing my labors upon the map when, above the moaning of the wind, I heard what sounded exactly like a human voice calling from outside the tent. My immediate reaction was one of utter astonishment. Nor was I vastly reassured to observe that Jamshid and Parviz had flung themselves upon all fours and, with their beards buried in the carpet, were beseeching Allah to have mercy upon their miserable souls.

I rose from my stool and removed my service revolver from its holster. Having unhooked the lantern, I thrust aside the tent flap and peered out into the night, thus making of myself a perfect target for any rogue who might have felt disposed to take a pot at me. I then compounded my stupidity by calling out loudly: "Who's there?" first in Persian and next in Arabic.

Receiving no response, I stepped out into the swirling snow and proceeded to investigate further. I discovered the mules huddling dolefully in the lee of the rocks, and I made a cursory examination of the snow for some sign of human footprints but found nothing. Feeling rather more confident, I executed a rapid circuit of the immediate environs of the tent, using the opportunity to check the security of the guy ropes. Thus I succeeded in convincing myself that what I had heard was some freakish effect of the wind blowing across the fissures in the sandstone and producing thereby a noise resembling that of a human voice.

I re-entered the tent and informed my two brave rascals that all was well and that they had nothing to fear. "It was the wind," I said, "blowing among

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the rocks. There's no one out there."

"Ahriman is there," whispered Jamshid, darting a quick, sidelong glance at his brother. *'You* cannot see him, Major, but he is there."

I replaced the lantern and restored my revolver to its holster. "Ahriman, eh?" I replied. "I must say that you surprise me. I understood that the Faithful had long since ceased to pay homage to *angro mainyush."*

I had purposely chosen the ancient Zend form of the Evil Deity in order to discover how Jamshid would react, and my reward was to see him raise his left hand to his forehead with the little finger crooked outwards in the sign of the horn. "So," I said, "Ahriman lives?"

Jamshid nodded. "The Old Ones did not die at the coming of the Prophet major. They hid themselves away. My grandfather told me how, long ago, up here in the snows of the Zagros a great battle was fought and the armies of Ahriman were driven back into the *Kaufa.* But they were never destroyed. They cannot be destroyed. Auramazda set *djinni* and *afreeti* to stand guard over them and make sure that they stayed where they are."

Parviz, who had been signifying solemn agreement during this recital, now chipped in with: "We must not go any further into the mountains, Major. That voice you heard was an *afreet* sent by Ahriman to warn you."

"Oh, yes?" I said. "And for how long has Ahriman been in command of his own jailers?"

This sly observation started them arguing between themselves, and finally Jamshid said, "It was not an *afreet,* Major. It was the ghost of a *Magian.* But Parviz is right. He came to warn us that we must turn back."

I realized that the moment had come for me to put my foot down. "We shall not turn back," I informed them calmly. "Did you not both swear on the *Koran* before the *mullah* to accompany me upon this expedition for the most generous wage of one silver *Kran* each per day? Do solemn promises mean so little to the Faithful? Shame on you both! Come, we will hear no more of such girlish nonsense."

Having thus delivered myself, I resumed my seat and had just taken up my pen when I heard the sound again. Although I had by then fully succeeded in convincing myself as to the true nature of its origin, I could not but marvel at the uncanny resemblance to a human voice. Indeed, by straining my ears, I could almost persuade myself that it was calling to me by my own name — "Or'mond .. Or'mond ... Or'mond" — with just that same slight hiatus between the syllables which I have long since grown to expect from the Persians.

Since there was no point in my making a second fruitless foray out into the night, I affected a stoical expression, as if defying it to do its worst, and commenced sketching in the fifteen or so miles of the watercourse which I had surveyed during the day.

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Within a minute the noise ceased, and I celebrated the event by lighting up a fresh cheroot and helping myself to another pull from my flask.

I turned in shortly before midnight. Parviz and Jamshid had by then been snoring for well over an hour. The wind had dropped again — rather to my relief, I must confess — and there had accordingly been no further visitations from any phantom *magi*. Then, just as I completed my prayers and was on the point of settling down to a well-earned rest, I heard a voice, close beside my head, whisper: 'Or'mond!'

I jerked bolt upright and held my breath. The heavy regular snoring of Parviz and Jamshid was sufficient to convince me that neither of them was responsible, and yet I would almost have staked my life that I had not imagined it.

Very, very cautiously I crept out of my blankets and felt around me in the darkness until I had located my revolver. Gripping it firmly I crawled to the entrance of the tent and peered outside. As I had half expected, there was no sign of anyone or anything untoward. I secured the wooden toggles with fingers which were a good deal less steady than I care to recall and made my way back to my cot. And this time, just to be on the safe side, I took the precaution of slipping the revolver under my paliasse.

I was woken at dawn by the sounds of my two rascals praying noisily outside the tent — a sudden access of piety on their part which I could only ascribe to the fright they had received the previous evening. I donned my boots, stepped out into the early sunshine, and went briskly through my Rumbolt exercises — that course of scientific calisthenics which I have striven to follow upon rising every morning for the past twenty years. I observed that the sky had cleared during the night and was now the palest sparrow's egg blue from horizon to zenith. The air was crisp and extraordinarily invigorating. To the north the towering peak of Shir Knh glittered like splintered glass in the bright beams — a sight which would surely have inspired a new verse of the *Rub'i* had old Omar been on hand to witness it.

Over a scratch breakfast I told Jamshid that my plan was to continue due east along the main watercourse until I reached the transverse valley which I had observed through my telescope the previous afternoon. If it proved feasible, we would strike out up it to the northwest.

In view of their response the night before I was expecting some opposition to this projected itinerary, but Jamshid merely shrugged and said, "As the Major wishes." Had I not been so anxious to push ahead with all speed I would probably have given more weight to this sudden change of attitude, but, in the event, I was quite content to seize fortune by the forelock and not go seeking for trouble.

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We struck camp shortly after eight o'clock and by half past ten had covered the six or seven miles to the transverse. The thin mantle of snow was already beginning to melt in the warm sunshine, though where the mountain shadows fell it was still pure and unsullied. As far as I could judge, the rock was mainly granite and crystalline schist with, here and there, traces of sedimentary sandstone. The vegetation was reminiscent of the High Steppes, namely coarse *puszta* grass and the ubiquitous mountain thorn, but there was also a species of brightly berried wild ash which, surprising though it seems, appeared positively to relish the arid soil.

The valley which I had made my goal turned out to be a good deal narrower than I had supposed. It followed a gentle right-hand curve as it ran in a general northwesterly direction for a distance of some three miles. At that point it appeared to terminate in a curious kind of saddle or sway-backed ridge. Down the face of this, through my glass, I was able to trace the threadlike course of a small cataract.

The presence of this unusual feature placed me in a dilemma. I guessed that beyond the ridge I should discover a lake for which the cataract was the overspill. If that were so, then there was little point in our attempting to push our way through, since the water would almost certainly form an all-out insurmountable barrier when it came to erecting a telegraph. On the other hand there was a slight though genuine possibility that the ridge was one of those odd geological faults caused by some ancient upheaval in which the whole sedimentary rock bed had been fractured leaving this ridge as the visible edge of a plateau.

By telescopic examination of the visible strata I tried to ascertain which of the two hypotheses was correct but could come to no definite conclusion. Three courses now appeared open to me. I could retrace my steps for thirty or forty miles and strike off towards Abekun, hoping to find some other way through to the north; or I could scale the nearest mountain slope to a point from which I could look down upon the ridge; or I could press on up the valley, clamber to the top of the saddle and discover what lay beyond.

The first option I rejected out of hand — or, rather, thrust to one side as something to fall back on; the second, I disposed of by the simple but fundamentally specious argument that it would take me just as long to reach a suitable viewpoint as it would to reach the ridge itself. My mind made up, I clapped up my glass and strode over to where Jamshid and Parviz had scratched out a grid on a sandspit and were playing at *zu-zu* with pebbles for counters. "I shall take one of the mules and ride on to find out what lies beyond the ridge," I said. "You will remain here with the baggage. If the route ahead is blocked, I shall return at once. If I find there is a way through, I

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shall flash a signal with the heliograph for you to join me. Do you understand?"

"We understand, Major," Jamshid replied. "When you flash the mirror, we come. If you do not signal, we wait for you here. Maybe, by the Grace of Allah, we shall catch some fish in the pools."

I placed the leather box which held the heliograph, the sextant and the theodolite in one of the panniers and balanced it with the case containing my maps, records and cartographic equipment in its neighbor, then I transferred the load to the saddle of the strongest of our five mules. It was approaching eleven o'clock and I reckoned it would take me roughly an hour and a half to reach the summit of the ridge. I thrust a stick into the sand beside the *zu-zu* grid, gauged what I judged to be a generous hour's span, and marked the point with a pebble. "Be sure and watch for my signal when the shadow reaches that stone," I told them.

"And if the sun chooses to hide himself behind a cloud, Major?"

"Then I shall fire two shots from my revolver. But if there is no signal, you are to wait for me here."

They both inclined their heads to signify assent, whereupon I led the mule down to the stream, waded over to the far side and headed inland along the margin of the tributary.

I had chosen the right-hand side of the rivulet because, from my previous observations, it had appeared to offer slightly the better traveling, though in truth there was practically nothing to choose between them. However, the slight dexter curve of the valley now meant that I would soon be hidden from the camp and would remain so until I scaled the ridge. Needless to say, at the time, this aspect of the matter never even crossed my mind.

I suppose that I had not been traveling for more than twenty minutes before I became conscious of the extraordinary *quietness* of the place. Had it not been for the faint but ever-present gurgle of the stream and the occasional rattle of the mule's hooves against the stones, I really think the loudest sound would have been the noise of my own breathing. There was no wind at all. The leaves on the stunted rowan trees, which grew even more thickly here than elsewhere, hung absolutely motionless above the stream. Nor was there so much as a whisper from the parched *puszta* grass. It was almost as if the whole valley were wrapped around with a thick, invisible quilting of cotton wool. Indeed, the word which best describes the quality of that silence is 'wadded.'

But there was something else too — something which is far less easy for me to describe because, at the time, I shrugged it off as being wholly fanciful and subjective. To put it in the baldest possible terms, I became convinced that I was being spied upon.

I say that I discounted it, yet I had experienced a similar sensation at least

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once before — indeed, in a very real sense, I owed my life to it. When the 4th were surprised by the Ayub Khan's men on the Dori river below Kandahar, I had known we were being watched for half an hour before the first shot was fired. On that occasion I had seen nothing and heard nothing, and yet such was the strength of my conviction that we were heading straight into an ambush that I confessed my fears to Colonel Wooler. Forately for us all he was prepared to listen to me, otherwise I should not be writing this today. So why, then, did I choose to ignore my present premonition? I can only suppose that my curiosity, my determination to see what lay beyond the ridge, had completely overridden my native caution. The only danger to myself that I could conceive of was that I might have the misfortune to slip and twist an ankle.

Shortly before noon I set foot on the lowest part of the ridge and received my first shock. To my astonishment I perceived that the channel of the cataract was not, as I had supposed, a natural formation, but was following a zigzag course down a conduit which had been most skillfully contrived from blocks of crudely dressed granite. Some fifteen feet up from the bottom of the ridge, the shooting water plunged roaring into a deep pool among the rocks from whence it bubbled away down the floor of the valley to join the larger river.

As I approached, greatly intrigued and excited by my discovery, I observed that one of the huge boulders which ringed the pool had, graven deep into its face, an inscription in the antique, cuneiform characters which I had come to associate with ancient Assyrian. I was, of course, unable to decipher its message, but it had the effect of intensifying a thousand-fold my already overwhelming desire to see what lay beyond the crest of the ridge.

I tethered the mule to one of the trees which grew beside the pool and began scrambling up the steep, grassy slope. By now the sun had melted the thin mantle of exposed snow, leaving the ground damp and slippery beneath my boots. Twice I lost my footing and fell flat on my face, but I was up again in a moment scrabbling my way upwards on all fours like an ape — a posture which, whatever it may have lacked in dignity, served my purpose very well. Even so I was twice forced to pause for breath before I reached the summit which rose to an altitude of some eight hundred feet above the level of the valley floor.

But the 'summit' when I gained it proved to be merely the skyline. Beyond it I discovered a further slope, less steep than the first, which in its turn climbed to a height of perhaps a further hundred feet over a distance of about five hundred yards. On the point of setting off once more I caught sight of the source of the cataract. This proved to be a hole in the rocks about

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half way up the face of the second slope. I walked towards it, and one superficial glance was sufficient to persuade me that I was indeed in the presence of some antique work of hydraulic engineering. Breaking into a run, I headed directly up the slope, my heart pounding with excitement.

I do not really know what I expected to discover — perhaps some long-abandoned historical site similar to the temples of Persepolis. What I did find was even more astonishing because it was so totally unexpected. I crested the final ridge and beheld, stretched out below me, a long, narrow valley similar to, but considerably shallower than that which I had just left. In shape it resembled a simple leaf — a comparison made the more apt by reason both of its greenness and the series of symmetrically spaced irrigation channels which ran down from the mountain sides at an oblique angle and converged in a slender, reedy lake which occupied the place of the main stem. Along the opposite sides of the valley two larger conduits had been skillfully engineered, and these, I assumed, supplied the lateral channels. The two larger canals converged directly beneath the point where I was standing and were then led through the hill to re-emerge as that very waterfall which I could still hear thundering faintly at my back.

At the far end of the valley a mountain rose steeply. Nestling in against the towering limestone cliff at its base were a number of red and white stone buildings. Some of these were exceedingly substantial, though at first glance it was difficult for me to judge their true stature because the whole of the northern end of the valley was densely wooded with what appeared to be olive trees. Indeed the greater part of the floor of the valley was forested to a quite astonishing degree, and it was obvious to me that at least some of the fields and gardens were still in a state of regular cultivation. Yet there was no sign of a human being. I took out my telescope and swept the whole area from end to end. I found wild fowl in abundance on the lake, goats and sheep grazing in the marginal pastures, even a flock of what looked like turkeys; but of men, women and children there was simply no sign at all.

At that moment, with a curiously heavy heart, I recalled what had brought me where I was. From the point of view of my mission I had reached an absolute dead end. Unquestionably my way lay back along the route I had come and thence westward towards Abekun, for by no stretch of the imagination could I envisage a line of army telegraph poles striding the length of this valley and clambering up the almost vertical face of the mountain at the far end. And yet I could scarcely endure the thought of turning my back upon it and riding away. The mystery of the place, its isolation, its undeniable antiquity had enthralled me like the Sirens' song.

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My struggle with my conscience was brief. We would camp here for the night. Perhaps, should Fortune favor us, we would be treated as honored guests. On the morrow we would continue on our way reprovisioned against the ardors of our retreat to the south. Meanwhile, I would have uncovered the mystery of the place and, on my eventual return to Albion's shores, would possibly feel moved to pen a modest (and suitably illustrated) account of my adventure, which would in due course grace the pages of *The Archaeological Review* or *The Illustrated London News*.

Savoring this heady prospect, I turned my steps towards that portion of the ridge from which I could survey our halting place. Only then did I remember how in my haste and excitement to scale the slope I had left the heliograph in the pannier along with the other instruments. I consulted my watch, noted that a full two hours had now elapsed since I had parted from Parviz and his squint-eyed brother, and then proceeded to focus my telescope on the place where I had left them.

It did not take me long to locate the sandspit, but nowhere could I see a sign of my two scoundrels. I assumed that they had given up expecting my signal and had elected to try their luck at fishing in one of the pools upstream. I unholstered my revolver and fired two shots into the air. The sharp double crack echoed back and forth between the mountains, and a flock of startled pigeons leapt clattering into the air above the trees. I extracted the spent cartridge cases from the chamber, replaced them with fresh bullets from my bandolier and restored the weapon to its holster. Then I refocused the telescope and waited for my rogues to re-emerge.

After five minutes had elapsed and neither one of them had put in an appearance, I fired two further shots which I sent winging on their way with a few choice imprecations. I had reckoned that it would take Jamshid and Parviz the better part of an hour and a half to reach me, and I had been toying with the notion of occupying the interval by making a panoramic pencil-sketch of the valley from the crest of the ridge. Now I had no option other than to retrace my tracks to the confluence, round up the brothers and bring them back with me, an operation which, I estimated, I would be fortunate to accomplish in less than three hours.

As if on purpose to exacerbate my anger and frustration, the sun chose that very moment to vanish behind a thick bank of cloud which, unperceived by me until then, had crept up from the southeast. I spent a further exasperating five minutes trying unsuccessfully to locate the brothers through the telescope. Then, thinking some most un-Christian thoughts, I finally descended to the bottom of the slope and untethered the mule.

Even though it took me less than an

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hour to retrace my route, in that time the cloud bank had advanced right across the valley until the only clear sky remaining was a pale, rapidly diminishing fringe above the mountains to the northwest. With the disappearance of the sun the temperature had dropped precipitately, and I guessed that it could not be long before more snow arrived. I urged the mule into a shambling trot while mentally I occupied myself in polishing and perfecting some stinging phrases for the benefit of my prize pair of infidels.

I began shouting for them as soon as I reached the meeting point of the streams, but the only audible response was the echo of my own voice. Strangely enough, the facts of the situation did not immediately occur to me. It was only when I could discover no trace of the mules that the truth finally dawned and I wasted my breath cursing my own folly and damning the brothers Alaghbandzadeh both to the Nethermost Pit.

I used my glass to scan the banks of the watercourse downstream, guessing that to be the direction they would have taken, but already the first flakes of the approaching snowstorm had drawn a grey curtain across the horizon. Besides, if my supposition was correct and they had fled at the very moment when I had first passed from their sight, then by now they were already miles away.

I sat down on a rock and took stock of my situation. The result was, to say the least, profoundly depressing. My sole consolation lay in the fact that they had not decamped with my precious records and that I still had the mule. Curiously enough, I think I felt even more bitter over the loss of my beloved cheroots and my *Kara-Kul* overcoat than I did about the tent. But I had been in far tighter spots than this in my life and had lived to tell the tale.

I tried putting myself in the position of the two rogues. I felt sure they would expect me to launch myself in immediate pursuit, and their first aim would therefore be to put as much distance as possible between us. Having succeeded in that, they would then head towards some sizable town — Niriz or Saidabad probably — hoping to dispose of their ill-gotten gains. Nevertheless, sooner or later, they would be bound to return to Bander Abbasi, and it was there, where I had originally hired them, that our score would finally be settled and they would learn, once and for all, that Her Imperial Majesty's subjects are not to be trifled with.

A large flake of snow fluttered down and settled on my hand. It served as a timely reminder that I would be well advised to seek shelter for the night. Since the risks attendant upon immediate pursuit were far too great to warrant more than a token consideration, my only practical option lay in that valley hidden beyond the ridge. So for the third time I forded the stream, and with the snow falling ever

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more thickly with each passing minute, drove my uncomplaining mule back along the track to the waterfall.

By the time I had regained the foot of the ridge, visibility was restricted to a matter of yards. Since there was no path of any description, I dismounted and set off on a diagonal course up the treacherous slope dragging the long-suffering beast along by its rope halter. As well as being intolerably tedious, this method of progression meant that for much of the time I was stumbling backwards through a sort of grey, feathery limbo, in which my only guides were the drumming of the waterfall and the angle of the slope itself. Several times I altered the direction of my zigzag track, and on each occasion I was constrained to shift one or other of the boxes into the pannier adjacent to the incline for fear that otherwise the mule would lose its balance and tumble back to the bottom. When eventually we gained the first crest, I was exhausted, but I took comfort from the knowledge that the worst was now behind me. I led my faithful companion across to where the stream issued from the hillside and there let it drink its fill.

My earlier survey of the valley had persuaded me that my best line of approach would be to follow the course of the right-hand marginal channel for as far as was practicable and then to strike off obliquely in the direction of the buildings. Any more direct approach would entail my negotiating several dozen of the minor irrigation ditches at the very real risk of becoming bogged down around the central lake. But the snowstorm had now left me no choice in the matter. I reckoned I would be extremely fortunate just to locate the channel without mishap.

I set a course as close as I could contrive to that which I judged I had taken earlier in the afternoon, my hope being that when I reached the summit my trained memory and my innate sense of direction would combine to direct me towards my goal. The upper slope being a good deal gentler than the lower, I was able to walk ahead leading the mule in the normal fashion while I peered into the fog of downward-drifting snow.

I estimate that I had covered approximately two-thirds of the distance to the top when I glimpsed what I at first took to be a freak effect of the storm. I paused in my tracks, squinting upwards ahead of me. There, as though suspended from the sky, were four tall, dim, cloudy figures which by no stretch of the imagination could I relate to anything I had seen there before.

For perhaps half a minute I stood stock still, peering up at them through the haze of sifting flakes, and then I continued cautiously advancing towards them. As I did so it dawned upon me that they were stationed along the ultimate crest and that it was only the whiteness of the intervening snow which had led me to suppose

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them to be floating in the sky. Immediately I hailed them in Persian, crying out that I was a lost traveler sorely in need of shelter.

They did not answer me directly but one of them raised an arm and beckoned me forward.

As I approached I saw that they were all exceptionally tall and clad exactly alike in long, voluminous garments of white wool which resembled the Arabic *burnus* except that they were belted in about the waist. The deep, scuttle-shaped hoods of these cloaks, projecting forwards like visors, made it quite impossible for me to judge either their owners' age or whether their skins were dark or fair.

I spread my right hand, laid it over my heart, and bowed, whereupon they all inclined their heads in unison, and the one who had first beckoned to me, now indicated by signs that I was to follow him.

The snow was still falling as thickly as ever, but they strode off down the far slope without a moment's hesitation, and, within minutes, we had crossed over the channel by way of a narrow stone bridge which I did not recollect having noticed before.

In an attempt to engage my guides in conversation I enquired whether it was the sound of my shots which had brought them out to investigate, but they were either unable to understand my Persian or — as it suddenly occurred to me — had perhaps undertaken some strange monastic vow of silence. Nevertheless, absurd though it may seem, I gradually formed the impression that they shared some form of inaudible communication between themselves. On at least two separate occasions, without any word being spoken, they all suddenly turned their heads and gazed out into the falling snow, exactly as if one or the other had drawn their attention to some event which was happening out there in the invisible valley.

It took us perhaps half an hour to reach the lake and to skirt around it. By then the snow had eased off a little, and as we entered the grove which earlier had obscured my view from the crest of the ridge, I was able tentatively to identify the trees as being, in the main, figs, olives and Caucasian mulberries, some of them obviously of a very great age. I was fascinated to observe that each tree appeared to possess its own individual irrigation capillary, fed, presumably, from those distant channels on the hillside. Here too, though without quite knowing why, I was convinced that the system was of enormous antiquity.

As we approached the head of the valley, the path between the trees broadened out and became smooth. The carpet of snow which covered the ground disguised the precise nature of the surface beneath, but I guessed that I was walking upon a dressed-stone pavement — a suspicion confirmed when, shortly after, we ascended a

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shallow flight of steps. Three further flights followed at intervals of a few hundred yards, and then we emerged from among the trees and were in sight of the main buildings.

At this point one of my guides turned towards me (all had been striding ahead two abreast during the whole of the journey) and indicated that he would relieve me of the halter by which I was leading the mule. I surrendered it to him with some reluctance, expressing as best I could, my anxiety for the precious contents of the panniers, whereupon, by means of an eloquent and economic hand gesture he succeeded in convincing me that my fears were wholly groundless.

We then proceeded towards the main entrance of the largest of the buildings. The closer I approached the more astonished I became, for I now perceived that the whole towering *façade* of the building was decorated with an incredibly elaborate series of bas-reliefs, a teeming, superbly sculpted, multitude of human figures, of birds and animals, hardly one of which was larger than a handspan. At a rough estimate there were perhaps ten thousand individual, snow-capped manikins, some scarcely taller than my finger, yet all so marvelously contrived that the plum-colored stone seemed to be in a constant shimmer of movement. So taken was I with this remarkable sight that I scarcely noticed my faithful mule being led away towards one of the buildings off to the right.

I stepped under the pillared portico wondering what other marvels were in store for me and found myself standing upon a floor of polished limestone. To left and right two doorways confronted each other, and straight ahead the wide entrance passage had been curtained off with a heavy woollen arras.

My guides indicated that I was to enter the left-hand chamber, which I discovered was illuminated by a single tall window set behind an elaborately fretted stone grille. As soon as my eyes had grown accustomed to the gloom, I was able to discern an earthenware pitcher and a basin set out upon a table. I availed myself of the opportunity to rid my face and hands of the grime I had acquired during my scrambling on the ridge.

While I was drying myself on the coarse cloth provided for the purpose, a curtain was drawn aside in a corner of the room, and a small boy emerged from a concealed doorway bearing in his arms a woollen gown. Apart from my silent and enigmatic guides, he was the first human being I had seen since entering the valley, and I wondered whether he too was under a vow of silence. I thanked him gravely in my very best oratorical style and was delighted when he responded, first with a shy smile, then a bow, and finally with the words which I must perforce translate as: "O Traveler, honored envoy of Ahuro Mazdao, thou art most truly welcome."

The curiously archaic phrasing and

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the choice of "Ahuro Mazdao" (the ancient Zend form of the Omnipotent Deity) rather than the modern Persian "Ormund" put me suddenly in mind of the odd conversation that had taken place the night before with Parviz and Jamshid.

"Ahuro Mazdao," I repeated. "This then is His temple?"

The lad gave me a curiously opaque look which I could make nothing of, touched me on the sleeve, and then held out his hand for my damp jacket.

Having first transferred my watch to my breeches' pocket, I unbuckled my webbing, removed my jacket and passed it across to him. I noticed how his eyes lingered wonderingly upon the butt of my revolver and the leather case containing my telescope, but I smiled and shook my head. Then I replaced my harness and permitted him to assist me into the gown. As I had surmised, it proved loose enough to conceal my accoutrements, though the presence of the pistol would have remained obvious enough to anyone familiar with modern weaponry.

I was about to question him further when he bowed again and vanished whence he had come bearing my jacket with him. However, I had not long to wait before I heard the sound of footsteps approaching and a figure which I presumed to be that of one of my guides appeared in the doorway. The deep cowl which had previously concealed the face was now thrown back revealing that the person I had all along assumed to be a man was, in fact, a woman! My reaction was a nice blend of astonishment and confusion, due in no little part to my deeply ingrained reverence for the fair sex and my sensibility regarding the social customs of the country in which I was a guest.

If my escort was aware of my confusion, she certainly gave no sign of it. She gazed down at me (she was fully half a head taller than I) with eyes which I was intrigued to observe were a devastating shade of deep, blue-grey. I noted too a broad forehead; skin paler than I had ever beheld in a Persian; eyebrows a little heavier than the otherwise most delicate cast of the features appeared to warrant; a straight nose; a classically wide, full mouth, and a firm square chin. It was in truth a noble face, proud as an Amazon queen's, and I was the first to lower my gaze.

"Thou art truly Or'mond?"

The question was simple enough in all conscience, but it knocked me clean over the ropes and out of the ring. I heard myself stuttering stupidly: "How can you possibly know my name?" though, had I had my wits about me, I suppose I might have deduced that she had somehow divined it from the box containing my records.

"Thou art awaited."

"Damn it!" I exploded in English. "Then there *was* somebody out there last night!"

She made a small pouting move-

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ment with her lips. 'Thou hast been woven clear for many moons, Or'mond. Come."

Turning on her heel, she strode off down the hall, where she thrust aside the arras and gestured me through.

I emerged into a long, high passage from which curtained entrances led off on either side. On the walls between each doorway lamps flared. So highly polished was the limestone floor that the flames were reflected back as though from water.

We walked the length of that passage and came to a second arras. By now I was convinced that this extraordinary building had been quarried out of the heart of the living rock and that I was actually advancing into the very mountain itself. I was puzzled too by the nature of the lamps which gave off an illumination more white than yellow and appeared to flame without visible wicks. Furthermore, the temperature everywhere was astonishingly mild — far too warm to be natural — yet, apart from the lamps themselves, I could see no signs of fire anywhere.

My guide parted the second arras to disclose a passage similar in every apparent respect to that which we had just left. The place was a veritable warren, yet obviously it had been constructed by human hands working to a sophisticated architectural design. My imagination reeled as I attempted to assess the years of toil it must have taken to excavate such a labyrinth from the bowls of the mountain.

We turned right, climbed several flights of stairs, and finally entered a hall at least twice the height of the corridor along which we had originally passed. The walls were hung with rich tapestries and the floor thickly spread with magnificent carpets, though otherwise it was bare of all furnishings. A series of stone fretted windows set high up allowed a thin snow-light to filter down and augment the wavering glare of the lamps.

"Rest thou there, Or'mond," directed my Amazon, and let herself out of the chamber through a painted wooden door, the first I had seen in the place.

I took the opportunity to inspect one of the lamps and decided to my own satisfaction that they functioned on some sort of natural gas (I presumed naptha which is indigenous to Persia), though precisely how it was contrived and controlled I was unable to fathom.

From the faint window light I guessed that I must be somewhere above the building which I had originally entered, and I tried without success to recall whether I had observed any windows set high up in the rock face. That I was unable to do so only attested to the manner in which the incredible *façade* of the building had so absorbed my attention.

I had just begun an examination of the tapestries, which were of a quality far surpassing anything I had ever seen in my life, when my guide reappeared

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and requested me to follow her once more. I stepped out through the doorway into another smaller antechamber and from there entered a salon of truly noble proportions.

Slender stone pillars supported a vaulted ceiling which was fashioned in a series of small, pointed domes to give an effect of quite magical fragility. It was as though one gazed up into the bell-like mouths of a cluster of incredibly delicate stone flowers. The effect was enhanced beyond measure by the lace-like tracery of the limestone latticework which served partially to screen off certain areas of the room. Daylight flooded in through six tall, fretted windows. These in their turn gave access to a balcony beyond which, the storm having passed over, I was able briefly to glimpse the snow-shrouded panorama of the valley and the peaks of far distant mountains. Everywhere thick-piled carpets muffled the tread and flaring lamps flung a fugitive network of shifting shadows across the silken hangings which lined the walls.

But although I was aware of all this at the time, can indeed recall it vividly to mind in all its bewitching detail, my immediate attention was drawn to the people who were gathered in the room and were regarding me with obvious wonder and curiosity. Apart from two young boys, and, of course, myself, all those present were women, and I did not doubt that among them were the four who had ventured out into the storm and had conducted me down the valley from the distant ridge. Nevertheless, as though drawn by an invisible leash, my eyes turned to one who sat slightly apart from the others, surveying me with, I fancied, the faintest hint of amusement in her grave dark eyes. I judged her to be of middle years — I detected a touch of grey in her dark hair — and truly I think that compared to some of her companions she was not outstandingly beautiful, but there was a fineness about her, an almost ineffable aura of *quality* which I find it quite impossible to convey in words alone. Thus it was to her that I made my obeisance, bowing from the waist, and wondering as I did so whether I was committing some heinous solecism by failing to fall upon my face and grovel like some mediaeval suppliant.

If I was, she chose to overlook my barbarism and in response to my brisk and formal courtesy made an almost imperceptible motion of her head. Then she beckoned me forward into the room and said, "Thou art welcome in the House of Anahita, Or'mond."

Her voice was soft, low and musical, perfectly in harmony with her physical presence. Her dress too was in no way ornate, being composed of a sort of short grey tunic worn over a silken undershirt, with soft knee-boots and woolen breeches. The only jewelry about her was a band of silver clasped around her left wrist and a gold medallion, roughly the size of a spade guinea,

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which she wore on a chain about her neck. Yet, even so, she was the most richly adorned woman in that room.

I bowed again and did my level best to express my gratitude for the hospitality, though all the while I was conscious that my mind was teeming with questions to which I was longing to learn the answers. Then, without quite knowing why I did it, I elected to round off my excessively flowery speech of thanks with a phrase of gratitude to the Grace of Ahuro Mazdao for directing my footsteps to her door.

The words had no sooner left my lips than I became aware of an immediate, almost electric, tension within the assembled group. It manifested itself to me in a series of quick, flickering glances which darted from myself to the woman I was addressing and then back to me again.

She frowned — whether from displeasure or perplexity I could not tell — and murmured something to those nearest to her which I was unable to catch, though I thought I detected a whisper of the name 'Ormund.' Then, turning to me again she said, "Thou speakst wiser than thou knowest, Or'mond. Who schooled thee in our tongue?"

I explained as best I might how I had originally learnt my Persian while stationed with the 4th in Baluchistan and had improved it during the two years I had spent attached to Sir Ronald Thompson's staff in Teheran. My recent secondment to Colonel Mallows' mission had come about because he had needed an officer with the requisite technical skills who was also able to speak the language fluently — two qualifications I happened to possess.

How much she could have understood of my explanation is difficult to say, but she listened to me without interruption, even nodding her head from time to time, until I began to form the ridiculous notion that she was checking off my items of information against some private mental list of her own. Nevertheless, I ploughed on gamely to describe the bare outline of my present mission which, after all, was hardly confidential.

When I had concluded my brief history, she said, "Thy servants have fled south, Or'mond. But do not thou think too harshly of them for that."

"Believe me, I'll skin the rogues alive when I catch up with them, ma'am." I growled.

She shook her head and smiled. "Those two are not like thee, Or'mond. They are simple and fearful men. Truly they intended thee no harm. They did but do as they were commanded. Thou hast my word upon it."

I stared at her. "Commanded?" I echoed incredulously. "By whom, ma'am?"

"It was done at my orders, Or'mond."

I found myself quite literally lost for words. And yet, in spite of myself, I believed her, even though I could not

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begin to divine what purpose could lie behind such an act.

She rose to her feet, moved across to the window and motioned me to her side. We stood and gazed out across the white valley. A few lazy flakes still fluttered from the leaden sky, and I guessed that more would shortly follow. She raised her right arm, pointed to the south, then swept her hand round to the west. "One day thy voice line will stand there," she said. "Four days' march to the south. It will pass through Kupah and along the banks of the Zayendeh Rud. It will never come to Khar-i-Babek. Thus all thy labors will have been in vain, Or'mond."

I nodded ruefully. "I knew that the moment I set foot on the ridge yonder, ma'am."

She gave me a sideways glance, and once again I was conscious of that secret inward smile of hers which so intrigued me. "Was it only then?" she murmured.

"Well, naturally, I thought that the ridge might conceal...." I began, and then broke off. She was right of course. The moment I had first glimpsed that ridge I had *known* that there could be no way through, that my route must lie back through Abekun and thence, doubtless, as she herself had suggested, on to Kupah and the northwest. Yet I *had* climbed the ridge, *had* seen the valley, and having seen it had known that I would not rest until I had explored it.

She chose not to pursue the matter, saying only: "Well, thou art come, Or'mond. Thou art a guest in the House of Anahita. We shall prepare a banquet with music in thine honour. Doth that please thee?"

"It pleases me greatly, ma'am," I replied, reflecting that not a morsel of food had passed my lips since breakfast.

There ensued a brisk general exodus from the room. I was expecting someone to conduct me to whatever quarters were set aside for uninvited guests, but no one did. Thus it was that I found myself left alone with my hostess, who, having resumed her chair, now indicated that I might sit on one of the low cushioned couches beside her.

"So, Or'mond," she said. "Hast thou no questions to ask of me?"

"Indeed I have, ma'am," I confessed with a smile. "So many that I know not where to begin. I seem to have beheld nothing but marvels since I entered Khar-i-Babek."

"Marvels? How so?"

"Why, this palace for one. When was it built? By whom? For what purpose?"

She laughed. "The ice melts, the dam breaks, and, lo! a flood roars forth! When? Perhaps three thousand years ago. Maybe more. Who by? The *Athravan* — the fire-kindlers — those whom thou wouldst call the *magians*. For what purpose?" Here she paused and regarded me pensively. "How if I say to enshrine the mysteries of Belit — she who was Ishtar and is Anahita?"

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It was my turn to smile. "You speak to me of once upon a time, ma'am, thousands of years ago when our world was still young. But how is it since then?"

"Think thou that Truth's children are fathered only by Time, Or'mond?" she countered.

"Then tell me how else, ma'am."

"By *Khratu.*"

I thought I recognized an archaic form of the Persian word which represents "insight" or "inner vision," and asked her if it were so.

"Yes," she said. "*Ahuro Mazdao* stole much from us, but that he could not steal."

"And so?"

"And so thou hast come to the last House of Anahita."

I blinked. To tell the truth it crossed my mind that she might be enjoying some elaborate private joke at my expense, yet she seemed perfectly serious, indeed almost sombre. I tried to recall anything I had ever read of the myths and legends of the ancient pre-Zoroastrian cults which had flourished in Babylon a thousand years or more before the coming of Christ and, like a diver bursting to the surface, came up clutching the blazing name of Mithras, which I thrust out to her in triumph.

"Mithras is dead," she said.

"So the old gods were not immortal, ma'am?"

"Only Zurvan is immortal, Or'mond. The old gods can live only in us, through our souls. Where is Verethraghna the dragon-slayer? Where is Vohu'Mano? Once they walked the world robed in splendor; temples were built for them; fires burned day and night. Yet where are they now? Gone like smoke, like the wind. Only their names remain, together with a few poor images scratched upon stones. We are the only gods left now, Or'mond: Thou and I. For at least a little while longer."

"But my God is not dead," I protested, and felt myself coloring even as I said it.

"The Galilean?" She studied me thoughtfully. "How if I tell thee that it was from here, from Khar-i-Babek, that the *magians* rode out to seek him bearing The Gods' gifts?"

My amazement must have shown plainly on my face, for she laughed and said, "O Or'mond, the story is all graven upon the stones beside the gate. Didst thou not note it? They had found thy god's birth woven plain in the loom. Ahuro Mazdao sent a star to guide them."

"I do not understand," I said. "What does 'woven in the loom' mean?"

"Later, Or'mond," she said. "All shall be made clear to thee, I promise. Now I am sending one to conduct thee to where thou mayst rest and prepare thyself for the entertainment."

Hardly had she uttered the words before a boy materialized from some concealed entrance and bowed before me. I rose to my feet, bowed in my

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turn to my hostess, and was led out of the salon through the portal by which I had entered it. We descended several flights of stairs, and came at last to a heavy carved wooden door. The boy opened it and I stepped through to find myself in a sort of Turkish swimming bath which, to my profound confusion, I discovered to be already occupied by at least a dozen strapping young females, each one of whom was as naked as the day she was born.

There is little point in my dwelling upon the events of the next fifteen minutes, other than to say that I trust I conducted myself with the decorum befitting an officer of Her Majesty and an English gentleman. When I found myself once again closeted alone with the lad, I asked him where all the other men were, but he just shrugged and smiled and would not be drawn. But the heated bath convinced me that the whole palace had been constructed around or above some natural thermal spring which, I felt certain, was related in some obscure fashion to the production of the gas or the mineral oil which fed the lamps.

I next thought to ask the boy (he was then assisting me to dress) whether he had attended upon many such guests as myself.

"No, sire," he piped. "Thou art the first. But I have heard tell that once, long ago, a *shaman* came out of the mist as thou hast and that he dwelt here among us for a while."

"And have you yourself never been outside the valley?" I enquired.

He looked at me with huge, scared eyes and shook his head.

"But are you not curious to see what lies beyond?"

Again he shook his head as much as to say: What sort of ridiculous question is that?

"But surely others go?" I persisted.

He twitched his shoulders as though to indicate that the very concept was meaningless. Realizing I was dealing with a fool, I pursued the matter no further.

From the dressing room he conducted me to a chamber situated on a level slightly below that where I had been given audience — a fact I determined by the simple expedient of glancing out of the window. I judged myself to be almost directly above the gate by which I had originally entered the palace.

The room itself, though somewhat sparsely furnished, was richly carpeted, and, to my great relief and delight, I saw that the two cases containing my instruments and my written records had been carried in and placed on the low wooden bench which stood beside the right-hand wall. There was also a bowl of dried figs of which I at once availed myself to stay the pangs of hunger. That done, I lost no time in extracting my journal, and while the day's events were still fresh in my memory, I filled several pages with detailed notes of what had occurred.

By the time I had brought matters

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up to date, the daylight had completely faded and the area immediately beyond the stone grille, illuminated by the lamplight from within, was once again filled with the golden shimmer of downward-drifting snowflakes. I restored my pen and notebook to their case, divested myself of my revolver and telescope, and then stood for a while gazing out into the darkness, reflecting upon the curious course of events which had brought me, in my forty-second year, halfway across the world to this remote and mysterious place.

My meditations were interrupted by the reappearance of the young woman who had first conducted me into the presence of her mistress. She had changed her attire and was now wearing a richly embroidered and belted tunic whose high collar was fastened close around her superb throat in the Tartar style. The uniform was completed by silk breeches and boots which were also finely embroidered with gold and scarlet thread. She acknowledged me with a brief nod and informed me that she had come to escort me to the banquet.

"In my country," I said, "it is customary for strangers to exchange names in order that speech may be made the more gracious. You know me as Ormond. How may I address you and your mistress?"

"I am called Sh'ula," she replied indifferently.

"And she you serve?"

Her grey eyes flickered. "The Anahita."

My surprise must have been plainly evident, for she frowned, regarding me curiously, and then she said, "Thou didst not know?"

Something in her tone warned me to tread warily. "I speak perforce as a man, Sh'ula," I said. "What form of address is prescribed for such as I?"

For some unknown reason this reply appeared to satisfy her, but she obviously had no answer on the tip of her tongue. "The weavers call her 'Mother,'" she said at last. "But thou, Or'mond...?" She spread her hands, plainly confessing herself at a loss.

"No matter," I said. "You may rest assured that I shall be as duly reverential at all times as befits an envoy of Ahuro Mazdao."

"And art thou truly so?"

I seemed to hear a voice whisper: *We are the only gods left now, Or'mond. Thou and I.* "Has it not been woven in the loom, Sh'ula?" I said gravely.

I saw her tense slightly and a faint touch of color appeared high up on her beautiful cheeks. "It has been woven," she murmured. "Come. They await us."

Feeling like an actor who, having forgotten his lines, has just spoken a mouthful of gibberish and somehow got away with it, I followed her out of the room.

* * *

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For a while I strove to orientate myself by referring back to the room I had just left, but after half a dozen right- and left-hand turns I had completely lost my bearings. For all I knew, Sh'ula might have been leading me round in a circle. The place was a veritable labyrinth, and the basic similarity of the corridors might have been expressly designed to confuse a stranger. And not once in our entire journey did I catch so much as a glimpse of another person, though I felt certain that the palace had been designed to house a multitude.

My conviction that this was so was reinforced when we at last reached our destination. That banqueting hall could easily have accommodated two hundred guests. Built around a central pillared nave, it had obvious architectural affinities with the state apartment, but it was constructed on an altogether grander scale. At one end there was a balustraded gallery to which access was provided by two graceful flights of stone steps at either end. Immediately below the gallery was a raised dais partly concealed behind draped curtains. Seated cross-legged in the gallery, a small group of musicians was twanging and tootling away on an assortment of zithers and *ghibis* and reed pipes. I was interested to observe that it appeared to be an all-male ensemble.

In the carpeted central aisle a low square table had been set out and cushions placed around it. Small groups of women were standing about conversing in low voices and, I am sure, surveying me covertly. Sh'ula led me to the side of the table which was facing directly down the hall towards the dais. Then, when I had taken up my position, she clapped her hands. The music stopped abruptly, and the assembled guests at once began moving forward into their places.

Just as I was beginning to wonder when our hostess would put in an appearance, the principal pipe-player launched himself into a spirited, bird-like *obligato* which he sustained with great skill for about a minute and concluded with a virtuoso's trill. At this signal the flames in the wall lamps sank to a glimmer, the curtains beneath the gallery were drawn aside, and there was the Anahita.

I had, I suppose, been expecting some more elaborate costume — something, no doubt, on the lines of Sh'ula's — but I was totally unprepared for the transformation I now beheld.

My first, startled, impression was that she had grown at least a foot taller, but this was an illusion created by the elaborate diadem she was wearing. At its crest shone a gold- and jewel-encrusted crescent moon and beneath it a constellation of twinkling silver and diamond stars. The whole effect was made infinitely more magical by the fact that the filigree of wires which must have supported the headdress

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was virtually invisible to a beholder's eye so that she appeared, almost literally, to be crowned with starlight.

Her own face was concealed behind a mask on which the eyes had been elongated and swept upwards at the outer corners by the skilful application of *Kohl* and some whitish pigment, while the full line of the lips had been sensuously enhanced with carmine. Around her neck was fastened a jeweled collar from which a single gold chain depended to her corsage. This in its turn was fashioned in such a way as to raise her bosom which, though it was indeed covered with a filmy gauze, appeared almost completely naked, an effect greatly enhanced by the fact that the aureole of each breast appeared to have been painted with the same shade of red as the lips of the mask.

The dress itself was truly regal, dark blue in color, full skirted, and magnificently embroidered with silver thread which, in the lowest tiers, had been worked into row upon row of cuneiform characters. In her right hand she held a twisted serpent of gold and in her left a large silver disc engraved with designs which, unfortunately, I was too far away to distinguish.

I was conscious that everyone around me had their heads bowed reverentially, and acting somewhat tardily on the wise precept that when in Rome one does as the Romans do, I followed suit. A few moments later the lamps brightened, the musicians struck up again, and when I raised my head, it was to see that the curtains were closed and the goddess had vanished, presumably whence she had come.

Some ten minutes or so later, Anahita re-entered the hall by a different door, She had discarded her mask and costume and was wearing garments similar to Sh'ula's, though rather less colorful. She took her place without fuss at my side and beckoned to one of the male servants to bring us wine.

I debated whether it would be in order to compliment her upon her performance but decided against it. Instead I asked her whether I was correct that the palace had once held many more people than it did now.

"That is true, Or'mond," she replied. "In the days of the *magians* every span of the valley was needed to feed the mouths. Now perhaps no more than a tenth part."

"And why is that, ma'am?" I enquired.

"The seed is poor and thin: our fields no longer fertile as once they were."

As she said this she contrived to gesture at the women around the table, and understanding her to be using the words in a symbolic sense, I said, "Are there then none willing to set their hands to the plough?"

"Thou readest me aright, Or'mond. Our heifers are barren because our young bulls are all bewitched by *haoma* and Zurvan's loom."

"Which I have yet to see, ma'am?" I reminded her.

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She nodded and sipped pensively at her wine. When she spoke again, it was to question me about my home in Gloucestershire, my army career, and the queen I served. I was astonished not only by the shrewdness of her questions but also by the wide range of knowledge they revealed. Eventually I was moved to ask her when and where she had traveled aboard.

She laughed and brushed aside my query with some obscure remark about my world thrusting itself upon her whether she wished it or no.

We remained at table for well over an hour. The food was adequate but by no means remarkable. Apart from some rather indigestible wild fowl, it was almost entirely vegetarian in character. The wine, on the other hand, was delightful, quite unlike any vintage I had previously tasted in Persia, having a most delicate fragrance and leaving a lingering, bitter-sweet aftertaste on the palate which was most attractive. It was also deceptively potent, as I discovered when the time came for me to rise from my cushion. I accomplished it only at the second attempt and with the assistance of Sh'ula's strong right arm.

She escorted me to a cloakroom where I was able to effect my toilet and, by liberal use of a pitcher of cold water, to rinse the worst of the alcoholic cobwebs from my brain.

When I re-emerged I found that Sh'ula had vanished and that Anahita herself was waiting for me. I attempted some fumbling apology but she dismissed it with a shrug and a smile and asked me if I was now prepared to visit the Great Hall. On my assuring her that I was she laid her hand lightly upon my left arm and set off along the passage.

We walked for several minutes, turning now and again, and twice descending flights of steps. Finally we reached a wooden door which was set securely into a wall of virgin limestone. Above the architrave a crudely carved figure in the shape of a winged globe had been cut deeply into the face of the stone.

Observing my upward glance Anahita paused with her hand on the wooden latch and turned to me with a faintly quizzical smile. "Knowest thou whom thou beholdest, Or'mond?"

I shook my head. Some enigmatic quality in that ancient symbol troubled me deeply. For the first time since setting foot in Khar-i-Babek I felt something akin to a chill of apprehension, a gathering in of the skin upon my neck and arms. "What is it, ma'am?"

"That is the mark of Zurvan," she replied. "It has been here far longer than the palace has been here. It is older even than the *magians*. Older even than Ishtar."

"And who is Zurvan?"

"He is Time itself, Or'mond — the Father of all the Gods." She paused. "Dost thou still wish to enter?"

I nodded.

"So be it."

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She thrust open the door and walked ahead of me down a short tunnel which was illuminated only by the light streaming in from a cavern at its far end.

Following a few paces behind her, I felt a draught of cool air blowing into my face and emerged to find myself standing in a vast natural cave. In places its roof must have been all of thirty or forty feet above the floor, which had been roughly leveled off and paved with limestone slabs. The light was provided by a multitude of flares like those which illuminated the palace, and by their glare I beheld one of the strangest sights I have ever seen in my life.

Standing right in the middle of the cave was a colossal loom. From end to end it must have measured a good thirty paces, and in height possibly as much as twenty feet. The main supporting pillars were of mortared limestone block, and the crossbeams, hewn from huge balks of blackened timber, were each twice as thick as the waist of a grown man. Around and above this astonishing machine an intricate scaffolding of wooden ladders and platforms had been erected for the convenience of the weavers.

All over the loom, like a host of industrious bees ministering to their queen, some thirty or forty men were busily at work. They appeared to vary in age from mere youths to ancient, bearded patriarchs. Three of these latter were seated on the platforms high above, from whence they appeared to be supervising the work in progress by means of long slender canes which they were employing both as pointers and as instruments with which to chastise the idle or slovenly.

The scene struck me as being so strange that I did not at first take in what was undoubtedly the most extraordinary aspect of the whole astonishing process. Gradually it dawned upon me that as fast as one group of weavers succeeded in completing a new part of the pattern, a second, equally industrious group, was frantically *unmaking the work at the other end!* Shortly after our arrival, a section having been successfully unwoven, a halt was called by the patriarchs, and the whole of the lower bed of the loom was laboriously levered backwards for a careful inch or two. The freed section of the underframe was swiftly disconnected by the removal of various stout wooden pins, and this section was then transferred bodily to the other end of the machine where it was slotted into place and pegged home. That done, new silken threads were immediately laid out and the whole incomprehensible process began all over again.

I had been gazing spellbound at the sight for several minutes when Anahita touched me on the arm and directed me towards a stone stairway. This led up to a balcony from which it was possible to see further into the cavern and also to look down upon the frenzied activity below. As far as I could make

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out, none of those at work upon the main loom paid the slightest attention to us, but some other weavers who were servicing two smaller machines further back in the cavern, halted in their labors as soon as they saw Anahita appear on the balcony and bowed towards her.

I was now in an excellent position from which to observe the surface of the tapestry that occupied the bed of the monstrous loom. In area it was rectangular and measured, at a rough estimate, some twenty yards by ten. It was quite unlike any carpet I had ever seen in my life, having no obviously detectable pattern, though certain parts of it did seem to my untutored eye as if they might conceivably be portions of some much larger design. The colors, though not in themselves outstandingly brilliant, yet gave an overall impression of a tremendously mellow depth and richness by reason of the subtlety with which they were blended. Predominant among them were deep ultramarine, viridian, ochre (of various shades), crimson, black, and white, together with a variety of intermediate tints produced by an intermingling of the basic shades.

The more closely I examined it, the more remarkable it appeared. I found that my eyes were wandering restlessly back and forth across the surface as though they were seeking for some hidden key which they knew to be concealed within it. I began to form the odd, unsettling impression that what I was looking at was merely superficial, little more than the visible vortices of some far deeper turbulence, and that the *real* carpet occupied some other dimension below the one which I could see. It seemed to me that parts of the design were shifting about even as I watched them, slipping below the apparent surface, only to rise again elsewhere, mysteriously transformed. I craned forward over the balcony, striving to peer down even further into the depths, and felt distinctly aggrieved when I heard Anahita call out to me.

A moment later I felt hands tugging at my arms, and I suddenly returned to my senses to find I was leaning back against the stone wall of the cavern while a phantom carpet seemed to swirl slowly around me like a multicolored merry-go-round. Then she was half leading, half dragging me back down the steps towards the tunnel through which we had entered.

I accompanied her rather like a sleepwalker until I found myself at last back in the state apartments without any very clear notion of how I had arrived there. She thrust me down onto a couch and brought me something to drink in a stone cup, which she held to my lips with her own hands.

Gradually, like sand whispering into an hourglass, my soul began to creep back timorously into my body.

Anahita stared into my eyes and sighed heavily. "So thou wouldst fly into Zurvan's arms like a lover, Or'mond."

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I closed my eyes and then opened them wide. Her face appeared to waver as though I were seeing its reflection in a rippled pool.

"Had the *shaman* not felt your soul's approach and cried to warn me, then most surely wouldst thou have been lost."

By an immense effort of my will I held her image steady. "The loom," I muttered. "Tell me. What is it with the loom?"

"For thee, Or'mond, it is the Bridge — *Cinvat.*"

"I don't know what you are talking about."

"And what *dost* thou know?"

"There's some mystery there, isn't there? Is it the pattern?"

"It is what it is," she said.

"What did Sh'ula mean when she said I had been woven in the loom?"

"We are all woven in the loom, Or'mond."

The conversation was taking on many of the qualities of those absurd exchanges one sometimes holds in dreams — it made sense, but only dream sense. I knew perfectly well that tomorrow, or, at the very latest, the day after, I would load up my mule and make my way back down the valley. I would climb the ridge and follow the distant watercourse until I reached the lower plateau and struck out for Abekun. Once there, I would find means to send a message back by trotting camel to Colonel Mallows in Bander Abassi. In my mind's eye I could see all the things happening so clearly, so very clearly....

Anahita had been observing me closely. Now she smiled and whispered, "*That* is the dream, Or'mond: this the reality."

So accurately had she read my thoughts that I simply stared at her and could not frame an answer.

She rose from the chair in which she had been sitting, walked across the room to one of the screened-off areas, and returned bearing a round brass tray on which were set out a crystal jug and two small glasses. She set the tray down on a low table between us and poured out two brimming measures of the pale golden liquid. One she handed to me and the other she raised to her own lips.

"Your health, ma'am," I murmured, and without pausing to consider what it might be, I tossed the liquor down my throat. It was sweet and tasted strongly of honey and peaches.

She took the empty glass from me, refilled it, and set it back on the tray beside my hand.

"Thou hast no wife, Or'mond?' she asked.

"No, ma'am," I told her. "In my humble opinion the army's no proper sort of life for a woman."

"But all men desire sons."

"True, ma'am. But there'll be time enough for that when I take my leave of Her Majesty's Service and settle down. That won't be so long now. Father's not as young as he was and the

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estate needs taking in hand. Believe me, there's a lot of work in managing a thousand acres. Gloucestershire's not like Persia, you know. You can't just turn Ormond Court over to the goats!"

I prattled on merrily in this fashion for several minutes, my tongue loosened by the drink. And not only my tongue, I must confess. I was, after all, a normal, healthy man, in prime physical condition, and I'd led a life of monkish celibacy for the past three months. Now, in spite of my determination, my confounded memory kept flitting back to that haunting vision I had beheld in the banqueting hall, and I realized that I was in very real danger of forgetting where I was and whom I was with. The time had obviously come for me to take my leave graciously while I was still in control of the situation.

But my hostess had other plans. Just as I was about to get to my feet, she said calmly, "Art thou prepared to lie with a goddess, Or'mond?"

I felt myself coloring as hotly as any schoolboy caught in the act. The truth of the matter was that I was completely thrown by the realization that it was she and not I who was in command of the situation. In my world the men proposed to the women and not vice-versa. And, yet, what man standing in my place would not have felt himself blessed above all others?

Some vestige of male gallantry still remained. I rose to my feet, took her hand in mine and raised it to my lips. "We are the only gods, ma'am," I murmured. "Thou and I. I am yours to command."

I have long made it a precept in my life's dealings with the fair sex that merely to take one's own pleasure, even though one is paying for it, is but to proclaim oneself a barbarian and a boor. The more pleasure one gives, the more there is for the taking. And never did my practice reap richer reward than in the arms of Anahita. Between us we unlocked the treasure house of the gods and therein gorged ourselves as though our hunger would never be assuaged. Like that other fabled queen, mine knew how to make hungry where most she satisfied. She was by turns imperious and submissive, fire and silk. She blossomed in the darkness like a rose until the silken chamber where we struggled was aswoon with the fierce musky scent of her passion. Together we plumbed the depths and scaled the dizzy heights, and finally, as though the words were being torn from her by the very ecstasy of her abandonment, she cried out wildly: "O Mighty Zurvan, I thank thee! For this I thank thee!" and then dissolved into shuddering sobs as if her heart were broken.

I did what I could to console her, but the fact is that the very mention of that name had snapped the spell by which she held me in thrall. When she had calmed down and was lying still

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by my side, I risked her wrath by questioning her further about the nature of the loom.

To my surprise she was all meekness and acquiescence. "How can Anahita hold her secrets from thee, Or'mond?" she sighed. "Between such as we there is only truth. Shall I say to thee that the loom of Zurvan is all ye are and all ye shall ever be?"

"Riddle me no riddles, goddess," I said. "By all that has passed between us tonight I charge you to tell me plain."

She raised herself on one elbow and looked down upon me. By the dim lampglow I beheld her damp and tousled hair, the scarlet paint upon her bosom smudged like a smear of blood, her eyes huge and luminous with their unshed tears; yet, as I live, I declare that never had I seen any woman one half so beautiful as was she to me then. "If I tell thee what I can," she said, "wilt thou promise to remain at my side till the sun sets tomorrow eve?"

"You have my word," I replied, reflecting that one day more or less would make little difference to me now, and, besides, mine was no case of Joseph and the wife of Potiphar.

She laid her hand lightly upon my chest as if to relish the steady beating of my heart. "What knowest thou of the Bridge *Cinvat*?" she murmured.

"Only what you shall tell me, goddess."

"Know then that *Cinvat* is the bridge between this world and the next, the bridge which spans the Stream of Time, that stream where Zurvan rules. All must cross *Cinvat*. Most souls Ahriman claims; some go to join Ahuro Mazdao in the Realms of Light; but others, one or two, are marked out by Zurvan for his service."

"And what service is that, my lady?"

"Combing the Stream of Time to feed the loom."

I frowned. "Then who are those I saw?"

"The *Shamani* and the weavers."

"Have *they* crossed this bridge?"

She laughed. "Nay, Or'mond, thou dost not understand. Those who cross *Cinvat* pass forever from our sight. But Zurvan's souls are drawn by invocation and the *haoma* fumes to whisper to the *Shaman*. What they tell is woven in the loom."

"And am I truly woven there?"

"Ah, my heart," she whispered. "Here is the loom where thou art woven," and she lowered her soft, warm lips to mine, thus, most effectively putting an early end to my cross-examination.

Such sleep as I had that night was plagued by troubled, broken dreams, many of which seemed to revolve about that shadowy loom. In one I recall struggling to free myself from the clinging strands of a silken web, and I awoke to find a tress of Anahita's hair lying across my face. I lay there listening to the gentle whisper of her breath-

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ing and wondered about her and how she passed her days. I knew, none better, that others must have lain where I was lying now, and the knowledge filled me with a vague, uneasy sense of foreboding. So much so, indeed, that had I not given her my word of honor I truly think I might have been tempted to steal from her side and, take my chance on finding a way out of the labyrinth and back down the valley. But the thought had no sooner crossed my mind than I dismissed it. When the time came for me to quit Kar-i-Babek, I would take my leave as a man of my word not like a thief in the night. Having thus come to terms with myself, I turned once more to sleep.

The morning dawned bright as a bugle. I flung back the coverlet, sprang naked out of bed and launched myself into my callisthenics with a truly spirited abandon. Gone were the mists and sad fancies of the night as I felt the eager blood rush tingling through my veins.

Anahita lay and watched me in silent, wide-eyed wonder, thinking, no doubt, that this was my ritual worship of some deity other than the divine Hygeia. "Truly thou hast the vigour of a god, Or'mond," she said when at last I stood beside her bed, flushed and panting from my exertions.

"Self-discipline," I replied, "that's all it requires, my lady. Ten minutes each day every day of the year for twenty-two years. Now if you'll allow me a cold splash and a chance to scrape my chin, I'll be on call for any course of action you care to propose."

The tip of her tongue emerged like a pink petal and lapped deliciously along her upper lip. "Hast thou flown the hawk?"

"Never," I said.

"Then that shall be our pleasure. Now I shall send for one to conduct thee to thy bath." She beckoned me close. "And do not forget that thou art pledged to me till sunset."

"Until tomorrow's dawn if you so will, my lady."

"Ah, would it were so," she sighed. "But Zurvan will not be denied."

Shortly after nine o'clock by my watch we issued out into the dazzling, blue-shadowed valley. The hunting party consisted of Anahita, Sh'ula, two other strapping young women, Be'ita and Ra'ani, and four elderly menservants, each of whom carried a hooded, long-winged falcon on his gauntleted wrist. A light breeze was blowing into our faces from the distant ridge. It stirred the high twigs of the olives and dislodged feathery wisps of snow which fluttered down upon us as we passed through the grove.

When we emerged into the open ground beyond the trees, the men handed over the birds and set off towards the lake. The girls spread out in a wide semicircle and, at a command from Anahita, slipped the leather hoods from their falcon's heads. A moment later the plaited traces had been

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freed and the birds tossed into the air. They drove up against the wind and began to circle, gaining height with each powerful downthrust of their sabrelike wings, until they were hanging high above the lake, four dark motes against the silvery blue of the November sky. Suddenly one stooped, plunging earthwards like a thunderbolt, and Be'ita cried out, "Mine! Mine! See, Azur strikes!"

Two others followed in quick succession, dropping like plummets towards the reed-fringed lake. One, Sh'ula's, missed its strike, and she whistled and waved a yellow cloth until the hawk swooped up and round and finally dived to her gloved wrist.

Only Anahita's stayed, swinging lazily round with the sun glinting from wing and breast while its mistress raged impotently far below.

Then there came a sound of distant shouting. Shading my eyes against the sun's glare, I saw a heron rise above the reeds and climb with slow, flopping beats of its grey wings, heading away towards the ridge with its long legs dangling below it like two broken twigs. Almost immediately Anahita's falcon checked and stooped, dropping like a stone, talons out-thrust and wings swept back, so that it almost seemed that one could hear the wind whistling through its plumage as it fell.

In her excitement Anahita clutched at my arm. "Ahh!" she cried exultantly. "See, Or'mond! Shapur kills!"

She spoke a moment too soon. At the instant when it seemed that nothing could save the heron it somehow contrived to twist in the air and the *coupe de grace* was missed. The sheer momentum of the falcon's stoop carried it almost to the ground before it was able to recover and race off in pursuit. By then the heron, turning in circles far tighter than I should ever have supposed possible for so large and ungainly a bird, had climbed almost to the level of the distant ridge, aiming no doubt for a sanctuary among the trees in the valley on the other side.

The falcon, sweeping round in wider circles at great speed, strove to regain the altitude it needed for a second attack. By the time it had risen high enough it was far out of earshot and, I judged, roughly above the point where I had first entered the valley. I saw it drop, small and deadly as a bullet, and this time it did not miss. Locked together in a faint puff of grey feathers, hunter and prey fell tumbling through the crystal air and vanished from our sight.

I turned to Anahita and congratulated her, but, to my astonishment, she simply shook her head glumly and said: "Shapur is lost."

"But he's only just over the ridge," I protested. "Somewhere by the waterfall I expect. Send one of your men. They're bound to find him."

"They cannot go," she said. "It is..." She hesitated. "It is not possible."

"I don't follow," I said. "Why can't they go?"

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"It is impossible, Or'mond. I cannot tell thee why."

I considered this for a moment and could make neither head nor tail of it. "Very well, my lady," I said. "We'll go. You and I. The falcon will come to you and I warrant I'll soon find the heron. It won't take us long."

She frowned and gazed at me in thoughtful silence for some seconds. Then she turned her head and glanced back towards the palace as though seeking some sort of reassurance from that quarter. She looked so troubled and ill at ease that I smiled and said, "It would be a great shame to lose so fine a bird for want of a little walking. Come, goddess, put yourself in my hands and I will guarantee your safety."

She looked deep into my eyes and then, all of a sudden, seemed to make up her mind. "We go to seek Shapur," she called out to the others. "Good fortune attend thy hunting."

We followed the same path that I had taken the previous afternoon. The tracks were still faintly visible as shallow indentations in the carpet of fresh snow. When we reached the bottom of the slope, Anahita caught hold of me by the arm. "I think it best we go no further," she said. "I will call to him from here."

She grasped the silver whistle which was looped on a thong about her neck and blew three short shrill calls.

I scanned the sky hopefully but there was no sign of the bird.

She tried twice more. Finally I said, "We might just as well go to the top, now we're here. If he's down by the waterfall there'll be much more chance of his hearing your whistle from up above."

She chewed her lower lip, nodded rather reluctantly, and, still following the tracks, we climbed on up to the stone bridge and crossed the canal. Finally we reached the point where my four guides had met me. I gazed about, fully expecting to see the hawk tearing at the body of its quarry, but there was no sign of it anywhere.

"It can't be far away," I said. "Come on."

"I cannot," she whispered.

"Of course you can," I said. "The going's easy here. The difficult part's over there beyond the edge of the ridge," and, to lend substance to my words, I set off briskly towards the place where the stream issued from the hillside.

I fully expected her to follow me but she did not. She stood as if rooted to the spot, gazing after me helplessly, not even blowing on her whistle. I waved back and called to her to come and join me, but she just stood, staring ahead of her into the distance, lost in a dream.

I soon reached the stream and from there made my way to the edge and peered down the steep incline towards the pool below. Almost at once I saw the birds — a dark patch starting out

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of the whiteness, about fifty yards down the face of the slope. There appeared to be no sign of any activity. Very gingerly I began edging my way towards them, expecting the falcon to launch himself into the air at any moment, but when I came up to them I saw why this had not happened. Shapur's talons were locked rigidly in the heron's back, and the falcon's breast was impaled upon the heron's beak as neatly as if by a hunter's arrow. It was indeed a strange and melancholy sight, a sort of mutual *quietus*, from which the blood had mingled to redden the snow. I picked up the carcasses and, with some difficulty, made my way back crabwise across the snowy slope, finally regaining the crest at a point about a hundred yards from where I had descended.

Anahita was still standing exactly where I had left her. I called out to her and saw her turn her head, first in my direction and then back again, for all the world as if she could not see me, though I must surely have been as plain to her as a chimneysweep against the snow.

I held the birds up and called to her again, and again she made that curious, blind, uncertain, hunting motion with her head. "Or'mond?" she called. "Or'mond?"

"Here! Over here!" I hallooed and began making my way towards her diagonally across the upper slope.

As I approached her, it suddenly struck me that she really could not see me. She was staring fixedly at a point some ten yards to the right of where I actually was. I was so astonished I came to a full stop and gazed at her in disbelief. "What's the matter?" I called. "What is it?"

Her head jerked round at once, relief transfiguring her face. "Ah, there thou art, Or'mond," she cried. "Why didst thou leave me?"

Yet, even as she spoke, I knew she still was not looking at me, though, by then, I could not have been more than fifteen yards distant from her. I walked ten paces across to my right, passing clean across her line of vision, the sound of my footsteps muffled by the snow, and there she was still gazing at the point my voice had last come from.

"Anahita?"

Her head swung round and, seeing her begin to tremble, I stepped forward. The instant I crossed some invisible demarcation line a mere matter of yards ahead of where she was standing, she caught sight of me and the grisly burden I was bearing.

She stumbled forward, gazing at it with mingled horror and fascination. "Shapur," she whispered. "Oh, my proud one! My wild Sky King!"

I dropped the heron in the snow at her feet and caught hold of her by the arms. "So what is it with you, my lady?" I demanded. "I am no longer visible to your eyes?"

She would not meet my look, and so I took her chin in my hand and turned her face to mine. "Come, tell me,

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Anahita," I said. "I know what I saw."

I daresay my peremptory handling bridled her, for she tossed her head back, freeing her chin from my hand, and cried with sudden, fierce scorn: "Thou knowest *nothing*, Or'mond! *Nothing!* 'Tis thou art blind, not I!"

"Then you must open my eyes for me, my lady."

She stood before me, feet planted wide in the snow, a fine regal flush mantling her cheek and her dark eyes ablaze. "Go," she breathed. "Go now if you canst! Perhaps thy pale Galilean will shield thee from Zurvan's wrath! They say he is partial to fools!"

"Very well, madam," I said. "If that is what you truly wish. Just let me return to the palace to collect my gear and the mule, and I'll be on my way."

She shook her head as if in complete despair at such incomprehensible obtuseness. "O Or'mond," she sighed. "Are thine ears blocked with wax that thou canst not hear what I say to thee? *I tell thee thou art marked out for Zurvan!*"

"I'm prepared to take my chance on that," I replied with a confident grin. "I think you'll find my God will prove more than a match for that old pagan. Now are you going to tell me why you could not see me on the slope?"

She flung her hands up in the air and then let them drop back helplessly to her sides. "For us there *is* no slope, Or'mond," she sighed. "*This* is our world's end. If I were to follow thee into the mist, Ahriman would snatch my soul and not even Ahuro Mazdao himself could wrest it back from him."

"Mist?" I echoed incredulously. "What mist? There's no mist here, Anahita. See!" and I began walking backwards away from her.

This time she did not even bother to look. She stooped, dragged the two birds apart, and set off back down the hill clasping the dead falcon to her breast.

I snatched up the heron and ran after her. "Tell me more of this, Anahita." I panted as I caught up with her. "Where does the mist lie?"

"There and there and there." She waved an arm vaguely towards the sides of the valley. "All around us."

"And what does it look like?"

"Thou hast never beheld mist, Or'mond?"

"Of course I have," I said. "At Dash t'ab we were pinned down for two days before the fog lifted. But that was real. This is something in your mind, Anahita. In your imagination."

"Yes," she said. "I know it. But what of that?"

Deflated and becalmed, I tried another tack. "But if it holds you here, if you cannot pass beyond it, how could you know about the telegraph? You remember how you told me how the line would run from Kupah to the Zayendeh Rud?"

She nodded.

"Well, then?"

"But that is of *thy* world, Or'mond; not mine."

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"So you admit my world exists?"

"Do you doubt it then?" she countered slyly. "Perhaps there is hope for thee yet."

"If it exists for me, then it exists for you too," I persisted.

By then we had come again to the stone bridge. As we stepped onto it, Anahita paused and pointed down at our twinned reflections as they quivered in the quietly rippling water. "I see thee there, Or'mond," she murmured, "and I see the blue sky below thee. Thus is it in thy world. For thee thy world exists. For thee the slope exists whereon thou foundst Shapur. But wherefore thinkst thou that all worlds are but one and that one thine?"

"I assure you my world is no mere reflection, my lady," I replied. "What's more, since you know of the Zayendeh Rud, you must know I speak the truth."

"There are so many truths," she replied, "and each world hath its own."

"Yet you know of my world, Anahita. How can that be?"

"How? Hast thou never traveled in thy dreams, Or'mond?"

"Only to places I have already visited in the flesh."

"Is't truly so?"

"Why, yes," I said. "All our dreams are made up out of our memories of the things we have seen in our lives."

"Thy world's dreams, perhaps."

"Yours too," I said. "Everybody's. Anything else is superstitious nonsense."

She glanced round at me with a rebellious flicker in her dark eyes. "Thou art not wise," she said. "Thou only thinkst thou art. Yet I tell thee this, Or'mond: thou knowest less of all that *truly* is than doth my poor Shapur." And with that Parthian shot she turned away and strode off down the hill towards the distant lake.

Anahita's exasperation with me (truly I think it was no more than that) lasted long enough for me to spend an hour or so alone in my own quarters bringing my journal notes up to date. I had almost concluded the task when a boy appeared at the door bearing my own uniform jacket and a message that my presence was requested forthwith in the state apartments.

I put on the jacket and slipped my notebook and a pencil into one of the pockets, hoping there might be an opportunity later to make a few rough sketches of some of the bas-reliefs by the gate and of the loom in the Great Hall.

As I followed the lad along the corridors, I noticed how the wall lamps on either side seemed to grow dimmer as I approached, though I could detect no corresponding fluctuation in the flames themselves. Finally I asked the boy if he knew why this should be. His eyes grew until they seemed to roll in their sockets like white marbles. "*Rubanan* (souls)," he whispered fearfully.

"Ah," I said, suppressing a smile.

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"And whose souls might they be?"

"Zurvan's."

"Is that so? Then what are they doing here?"

His face set like a mask of brown stone, and he scuttled on ahead of me at such a pace that it was all I could do to keep him in my sight.

By the time I had reached the antechamber, my timid guide had vanished. So I knocked on the painted wooden door and heard Anahita call out to me to enter.

Inside I found the other members of the hunting party seated on cushions around a low table on which a spread of fruit and cakes had been set out. I bowed to Anahita and then, collectively, to the others.

Anahita poured out a glass of wine and handed it to me. "Be seated, Or'mond. We wish you to tell us more of thy strange country and of the queen who is thy sovereign."

I settled myself at her side and began telling them about the United Kingdom and our monarchy and the rule of Parliament. From the expressions on their faces I could tell that they might have been listening to a first-hand account of Gulliver's Travels. One of them — Be'ita I think it was — interrupted to ask me why, since we paid homage to a queen, we had no women in our Parliament.

I explained, laboriously, that our womenfolk ruled in their own homes and had no desire to share in the ardors of government.

She nodded. "Then it is by their own choice, Or'mond?"

"It has always been so," I said. "We think it is for the best."

"The best for men," she laughed.

"For all," I assured her. "Men and women both."

"But thou speakest as a man, Or'mond."

"And you as a woman," I retorted. "I see no men here."

"Why should there be?" she replied, plainly puzzled. "They serve the *shaman* and the loom; we serve the Anahita."

"But the children — families...?"

"I have had my child," she said, "and Sh'ula likewise."

"Then where are your husbands?"

The Persian word I used seemingly conveyed nothing to her at all, and it was left to Anahita to explain, as best she could, what it was I meant.

To my astonishment they burst out laughing as though the very idea of living together as man and wife was the most ludicrous notion they had ever heard. Even Anahita smiled, though I knew for a fact that she was perfectly familiar with the concept. By whatever means she had acquired her knowledge of the outside world, it was obviously far more extensive than theirs, which was, in truth, all but nonexistent. What for them could hardly have been other than fairy tales were, for Anahita, something different, intellectual postulates perhaps, or simply strange foreign customs.

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But for all that, the time I spent in their company passed pleasantly enough, and I was able to glean some useful scraps of information about the functioning of their strange little community. Thus I learnt that the cultivation of the valley was the responsibility of an elderly female *darogha*, or overseer, who gave orders as to which crops were to be planted in which fields and generally superintended the vines, the olive groves and the animals. The actual fieldwork was carried out by men who were either not directly involved in Zurvan's service or who had left it (this point was never made entirely clear), and by the youths and young maidens who had not yet been initiated into their respective cults. There was also a third group of men whose occupation was to provide entertainment (music) and "decoration," by which was apparently meant carving in wood and stone. These men also attended to the secondary looms. Complementary to this group was one of women who were only indirectly engaged in the service of the Anahita. Their principal duties were the preparation of food and wine and the production of silk from the worms which fed upon the mulberry leaves.

I did my level best to extract from them more detailed information about Zurvan and his extraordinary loom, but I was totally unsuccessful. Nor were they more forthcoming about the precise nature of their own "service" or about the vanished *magians* who, I presumed, had originated their mysterious cult. For them, if not for Anahita herself, an inpenetrable wall seemed to divide the two areas of their lives, and, in the end, I was forced to conclude that they simply *could not* tell me what I wished to know. Just as it had been with Anahita up on the ridge, no sooner did I attempt to question them about their "mystery" than I seemed to step clean out of their consciousness into an entirely different world, one in which they could neither see me nor comprehend my questions.

When I was once again alone with Anahita, I broached to her the possibility of making some rough sketches of the bas-reliefs while the light still held. She heard me out and then drew my attention to the water-clock. "We have scarce three hours left, Or'mond," she said. "But I can show thee pictures if that would please thee."

I pricked up my ears at once. "You have some drawings of the carvings by the gate?"

"I have pictures of all kinds," she said with a smile. "Come. I will show thee."

She led me into an adjoining room whose walls were lined with shelves of fretted stone. Each shelf held a single row of scrolls. She pulled out the first she came to, blew the dust from it, and handed it to me.

I drew the scroll from its tooled leather case and began carefully to unwind it. The vellum was wonderfully preserved, white as the whitest paper,

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and the calligraphy was of an "eyelash" quality I had never seen outside the Imperial Archive in Teheran. But it was the illustrations which made me catch my breath. They were absolutely magnificent. The richness of color, the economy of line, were infinitely superior to any Mogul art I had ever set eyes on. Strangest feature of all, the pictures themselves were not obviously Persian — in fact the first ones I came upon appeared to depict the construction of a Roman aqueduct and various military roads and bridges, all exquisitely accurate down to the smallest detail; so much so that, had I possessed a magnifying glass, I did not doubt that I could have read the very inscriptions that were being chiseled into the foundation stones.

Anahita reached down another from a different shelf. I opened it and found that the first picture was of a portion of the night sky in which Ursa Major was prominent. The second was of a white and blue planet with three small moons circling about it. The third of a shallow, green lagoon, fringed with strange trees which looked like some extraordinary cross-breed between palms and giant grasses. The fourth showed an enormous machine with jointed legs like a silver beetle, and others again depicted yet more astonishing machines, one at least of which appeared to be hanging suspended in the air like a child's windmill.

"What *are* these?" I asked Anahita.

"I have never seen anything like them in my life!"

"They were plucked from the loom," she said carelessly. "They are very old."

"They are undoubtedly the work of a master," I averred. "Who can have done them?"

"I know not. The *magians* maybe."

I had examined perhaps a dozen different scrolls, some so whimsical and fantastical that I could hardly begin to describe them, when Anahita extracted another form a quite different shelf. Turning to me with a smile she said, "Come, Or'mond. Let us go and peruse this one together at our leisure."

We re-entered the salon and, at her invitation, I seated myself beside her on the couch as she unsheathed the scroll and began to unwind it before me.

I had no prior notion of what it might prove to contain, though had I been a little more alert, I could perhaps have guessed that she was in no mood for discussing the finer points of art. Her fancy had moved on to other, less abstract, pursuits, and she had chosen this way of letting me know where her immediate interest lay. And very charming the studies were too; the youths without exception, gallant and magnificently endowed; the maidens delectably supple and ingenious; and all the participants in the *jeux d'amour* seemingly indefatigable in the pursuit of their mutual pleasure.

Since it was clearly a case of "Gath-

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er ye rosebuds while ye may," I took the hint and, without further ado, escorted her to the bed chamber.

The rays of the declining sun were turning from orange to rose-red when Anahita sighed heavily and said, "Ah, but it grieves me to surrender thee while so many sweet songs still remain unsung. Would that I could stand on *Cinvat* by thy side and go with thee, for thou art indeed a man after my own heart's image."

Her mood perplexed me at least as much as her words flattered me. "I leave you for but an hour, goddess," I said. "It is all I ask."

She looked at me as if she were about to say something and had then changed her mind. Rising from the bed, she gathered a silken gown about her and disappeared into the salon. I sat up and began to pull on my clothes.

In a little while she returned. In one hand she carried a cased scroll and in the other a small glass of some milky-colored liqueur. She gave me the glass and I sipped the cordial gratefully. I recall that it tasted faintly of peppermint.

When I had drained it off, she handed me the scroll saying: "This is a gift from me to thee, Or'mond. May it serve to remind thee of Anahita wheresoever thou goest."

I thanked her profusely and was about to extract the scroll from its case when she stopped me. "No. Not now," she said. "There will be a time. Now thou must make haste to dress thyself, for one already waits without to conduct thee to the Great Hall, as is thy wish."

"That's capital, my lady," I said, shrugging on my jacket. "And will you send someone to fetch me if I should overstay my leave?"

She turned her dark head away, murmuring words I could not catch, and something about her posture seemed to lay a finger on my heart. "Why do you not come with me, Anahita?" I said. "You could introduce me to the *Shaman* and tell me what's what."

"Nay, my heart, I cannot," she murmured. "This time thou must go alone."

It was on the tip of my tongue to say, "Perish the thought. All for love and the loom well lost" but that streak of insatiable curiosity which has so often proved my undoing intervened once again. I fastened up the last button on my tunic, stepped across to her, took her in my arms and tasted brine on my lips.

She walked in silence by my side as far as the exit to the antechamber. As she opened the door she thrust the gift scroll into my hand and let her fingertips brush lightly against my cheek. "Remember, Or'mond," she whispered, "and so shall I remember."

"One brief hour, my lady," I murmured and brought my right hand to my brow in a cheerful salute.

* * *

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The guide she had chosen for me was an old man with a long white beard whom I did not recall having seen before. He stalked on ahead of me flourishing a striped pole in his right hand. Every now and again he rattled this staff loudly against the walls of the corridor, and whenever he did so the lamps seemed to flare up with renewed brightness.

When we reached the entrance to the cavern, I halted and took out my notebook and pencil, intending to make a swift sketch of the image of father Zurvan. Perceiving my intention, the rascally old guide turned upon me brandishing his staff above his head and making a very eloquent dumbshow of the fact that he strongly disapproved. The message was far too plain to ignore, and so I bowed respectfully before the winged image and restored my notebook to my pocket. The old rogue grunted, sniffed suspiciously, then gave me a smart, admonitory rap on the head with his pole, thrust open the door and gestured me through.

I entered the tunnel reflecting that his tetchy reaction did not augur too well for my hopes of making a series of sketches of the loom itself, and I had just resolved that, if necessary, I would commit as much of the detail as I could to my memory and work it up later in the privacy of my quarters, when I received a sharp and quite painful blow in back from the butt end of his staff. I was, in truth, more surprised than hurt, but when I received a second blow, even harder than the first, I swung round, knocked the pole to one side, and told the old wretch to have a care since I was no mule in need of goading.

"On, dog," he growled (they were the first words he had spoken to me). "Zurvan waits."

For the first time since entering the palace I seriously regretted the fact that I was unarmed. What had, up to then, been little more than a highly intriguing adventure had now become, through the use of one single uncivil phrase, strangely sinister. I felt a sudden involuntary tightening of the muscles across my stomach and found my fingers gripping the leather case of the scroll as if it were a constable's truncheon. It was thus that I emerged into the cavern and looked about me.

The first thing I noticed was that nobody appeared to be actually working the loom. The weavers were gathered about it, and the three old patriarchs were seated, canes in hand, on the platforms above. One and all they were gazing steadfastly in my direction.

I traded them stare for stare; then, turning to my ill-mannered guide, I remarked, "The Anahita expects me within the hour."

The old ruffian turned his head to one side and spat upon the stone floor. Then he gripped me by the upper arm and thrust me forward.

As though this were the signal they

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had all been waiting for, the patriarchs slapped their canes against the gigantic wooden beams of the loom and the weavers sprang into action.

Oddly enough, I found this sudden activity reassuring. In a trice I had persuaded myself that my misgivings were totally unfounded — that Anahita had arranged all this for my special benefit and that only the incomprehensible irascibility of my guide was to blame for my unease. Freeing myself from his grip, I strode boldly forward and, with all my earlier curiosity rekindled, gazed upwards at the rippling web of threads, while all about me the weavers scurried back and forth like demented ants, totally ignoring me.

I made a slow circuit of the immense machine, studying it from every angle, noting the simple but ingenious arrangement of pawls and levers by which the bed was adjusted, and the method of operation of the pulleys and windlasses employed to raise and lower the beam which held the lateral threads. Having satisfied myself that I should be able to reproduce it satisfactorily in my journal, I decided to remount the stone steps to the balcony, and I had taken perhaps half a dozen paces in that direction when I noticed that the old rascal with the striped pole was gesturing me imperiously towards one of the ladders which gave access to the high platform. Since that would obviously allow me the best possible viewpoint and since nobody appeared to raise any objection, I walked forward, placed my foot upon the bottom rung of the ladder and climbed up.

As my head emerged through the open hatch the three patriarchs all nodded approvingly, and one of them indicated with his cane that I might take up a position at his side.

I expressed my profound sensibility of the honor accorded me, stepped on to the platform, and settled myself cross-legged upon the wooden boards which had been polished satin smooth through generations of constant use.

For a little while the sheer novelty of the changed perspective absorbed my whole attention, for I was now looking almost directly down upon the bent backs of a dozen or so weavers. They were kneeling, as if in devout prayer, side by side across the thick wooden plank which spanned the bed of the loom, and their fingers were flickering as nimbly as shuttles along the edge of that incredible arras. Since I could see no evidence of any drawn design, I was quite unable to divine the precise nature of their inspiration, though it was clear to me that the aged *shaman* at my side was, in some arcane fashion, superintending their labors.

It was not long before the woven web began to exert its familiar fascination. As I stared down, ever more intently, I became less and less aware of the distinct activities of the weavers — indeed they seemed almost to become an integral part of the pattern itself, blending in with the shadows cast across the web's surface by the massive

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scaffolding, and even with the click and thump of the machine itself, to form an hypnotic, lulling, timeless rhythm which entered my head through eyes and ears alike.

I sensed rather than saw that the cavern was gradually growing darker while at the same time the tapestry itself was becoming mysteriously brighter. With mounting excitement I perceived how certain parts of the pattern were beginning to form themselves into coherent, though fugitive, shapes. I glimpsed a tree here, a bird there, an animal somewhere else; yet all was fluid, shifting, re-arranging itself before my wondering eyes.

Then, dimly at first, like mist gradually lifting to disclose a whole new landscape hitherto unperceived, the mystery of the loom slowly began to reveal itself to me. I became racked by an almost unbearably poignant sense of yearning, intense far beyond all breathing human passion. It was as though my very soul were being coaxed gently forth out of my body, drawn upwards like some fragile golden flower towards some unimaginably splendid sun. And this time there were no restraining hands to hold me back. All around me, radiating outwards to the farthest reaches of the visible horizon, the rippling carpet stretched, a multiplicity of glittering wonders, a dazzling miracle of light and color, streaming and streaming forever outwards, on and on, beyond infinity itself, into the shadowy kingdom of the Beginning and the End of all things....

I awoke to that sort of inward silence which sometimes afflicts the unwary after the detonation of an explosive mine or the nearby discharge of a piece of heavy field ordnance, a dull, muffled stillness which yet contains the sensation of a colossal, soundless vibration.

Because I could not conceive of any other state which seemed to fit my predicament so well, my first coherent thought was that I must be dead. The extraordinary sensation of numbness afflicting both my body and my mind; the still raw memory of having undergone some tremendous spiritual shock; these both appeared to me to be perfectly feasible after-effects of death. And yet, even as I speculated tentatively upon the possibility, I knew that I was not dead, that my soul was still confined within my body, even though that body appeared to have been deprived of several of its physical senses. Two things combined to convince me that I was still alive: the first was a faint but unmistakable flavor of peppermint on my tongue; the second the sight of the scroll that Anahita had given me and which I had carried with me during my examination of the loom. I was dimly aware that this scroll was still gripped in my right hand, though I had no corresponding tactile sensation of actually holding it.

Incredible though it may seem, I did not know whether I was standing

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up or lying down. I had no sensation of *weight* at all, and, to begin with, the range of my vision was limited to the extremities of my own body. Beyond that, all was shadow, grey mist in which no varying degree of darkness or brightness was perceptible. Yet the illumination itself was real enough, for when I closed my eyes (which I could do perfectly naturally) I found myself in darkness. Furthermore my recollection of those events which had immediately preceded my translation into limbo was almost preternaturally vivid. I had no doubt at all that the loom itself had been in some extraordinary (and to me wholly inexplicable) fashion responsible for what had happened. But *how* this might be so I had no means of knowing.

In a curiously detached manner I explored the possibility that I had fainted, fallen from my perch (I had the clearest possible mental image of the tapestry seeming to explode outwards all around me), and had then dropped clean through the silken fabric of the web. But if that were so, would I not now by lying, possibly concussed, among the fluff and dusty debris which I had seen masking the stone slabs below the bed of the loom? By no stretch of the imagination could I accept that this was where I now was.

How long I remained in this state of spiritual and physical suspension I have no means of judging, and knowing all I do now, I do not think it would be either profitable or meaningful to speculate upon it. Let it suffice to say that a moment arrived when I became aware that feeling of a sort was beginning to return to my limbs. I experienced it as a faint prickling sensation in my toes and fingerends, a sensation which spread by slow degrees upwards along my arms and legs until it reached my trunk. At the same time the grey fog in which I was enshrouded started to clear (perhaps it would be more accurate to say that it was my own vision which started to clear), and I began to perceive the dim, spectral outlines of physical objects surrounding me.

The first thing I discovered was that I was lying in a sort of net, or hammock, which was suspended between two stone pillars. My immediate supposition was that these were two of those massive stanchions that formed the four corner posts of the great loom, but though there was indeed a superficial resemblance, I soon realized that these columns were round whereas the others had been square.

My next thought was that I had been carried here in a state of unconsciousness and that I was now lying in some quarter of the palace which had been set aside for the sick. I at once began feeling my head and body for evidence of injury and could find not even one solitary spot of tenderness.

Oddly enough, up to that point, I had not been conscious of any feelings of fear or even alarm. My state of mind can best be described as vaguely specu-

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lative, dreamlike, curiously detached. Now, with the return of bodily sensation, I became both alarmed and perturbed. I pulled myself upright in the hammock, swung my legs over the side and dropped to the floor. I felt the reassuring jar of the flags beneath my boot soles, and I heard no sound at all.

I think I shouted out; certainly I stamped down hard with my heels; and I know that I lifted the leather scroll case and slapped the palm of my left hand quite sharply enough to make my skin tingle. For all the noise it made I might have been whipping myself with a feather. And yet, despite such seemingly irrefutable evidence, I was not wholly convinced that I had been struck deaf, though had I been asked to supply a reason I could not have offered one.

I turned my attention to my immediate surroundings. The first thing which struck me was that I could detect no definite source of illumination and, consequently, nothing that could be called a proper shadow. The light seemed to be coming from everywhere at once. It was neither dim nor bright, and if it could have been said to possess any single outstanding quality, it was of a pearly, diffuse opalescence which softened outlines and distorted one's perception of space. I peered about me trying to locate some door or window, but all I could see were more pairs of pillars receding into the distance like a double row of petrified masts.

I began wandering down this strange aisle in search of someone or something to give me a clue as to my whereabouts. I must have covered almost half a mile when I saw ahead of me another hammock similar in every respect to that in which I had been lying. I examined it closely, and then, acting on a sudden chill suspicion, I dropped the scroll case into it and continued on my way. Sure enough, when I had covered some eight hundred paces, I beheld, ahead of me, the hammock and, lying within it, the leather case precisely as I had left it.

I stared at it in utter consternation, striving to make some sense out of what I knew must have happened. Then, leaving the case where it was, I walked twenty paces away from it and aligned myself in such a fashion that the two pillars from which the hammock was suspended were standing one behind the other directly in my line of vision. I then began to march slowly away from it counting off my paces and glancing backwards over my shoulder from time to time to make certain that I was still proceeding at an approximate right angle to my previous course.

Gradually the pillar diminished in the distance. At three hundred paces I could no longer clearly distinguish it, but I kept walking steadily forward until, as I took my four hundred and eighty-third step, I saw, far ahead of me and slightly to my left, the exact point from which I had departed.

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Never in my life have I been closer to surrendering to sheer, overwhelming panic than I was at that moment. A cold dew of perspiration broke from every pore, and my whole body began to tremble as if I were in the grip of some intolerable malarial ague. I felt as if I were drowning, clutching desperately at one insubstantial mental straw after another, and nowhere finding anything rational to sustain me. And yet I somehow still contrived to count off my paces to the bitter end. They totalled eight hundred and twenty-two.

I sank down onto the stone floor, placed my back against one of the pillars, cupped my chin in my hands and tried to reason some sense out of my predicament. Having failed completely, I took my notebook from my pocket and penciled in a small cross in the center of a blank page. I then drew a circle with one arm of the cross lying along its circumference and wrote the figures 800 above the curving line. Along the second arm of the cross I traced an identical circle and followed this with two others until I had produced a shape resembling a four-leaved clover made up of two "8s" at right angles to each other.

The simple familiar action of drawing did more to restore my confidence than I could have supposed possible. I stared at the design I had produced and carefully circumscribed the four circles with a fifth. Where the circumference impinged I placed four dots. Using these as my guides, I then extended the whole design symmetrically outwards and at the outer limits I placed four more crosses.

Struck by the similarity to a basic Mercator projection, I carefully tore out the sheet and began bending it this way and that until two of the outermost crosses roughly coincided. I examined the tube I had produced and concluded that the only shape which would satisfy my demands was a true sphere; I was striving to represent in two dimensions that which could only be represented satisfactorily in three.

I restored my notebook to my pocket and, rising to my feet, gazed all about me, endeavoring without success to conceive of myself as upon the surface of a sphere whose circumference measured approximately eight hundred yards. I searched for some signs of curvature on the paved limestone floor and found none; yet I was certain that I had only to set off in a straight line in any direction and, in due course, I would arrive back at the precise point from which I had started out.

I stared upwards to where the tops of the pillars appeared to lose themselves in the soft luminescence some twenty or so feet above my head, and I suddenly found myself recalling Anahita's scornful words: *Thinkst thou that all worlds are but one, and that one thine?*

No sooner had I recalled it than I remembered the scroll she had given me and which was still lying in the

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hammock where I had dropped it. I picked it up, untied the thong which held the cap in place and drew out the roll of parchment.

Supposing it to be such another morsel of the oriental erotica as we had enjoyed together, I was no more than mildly curious, but no sooner had I begun to unroll it than I realized that I was guilty of a grave injustice to Anahita. In my hands I held something which, I guessed, might prove the very key I had been seeking to all that had befallen me since I had first set foot in Khar-i-Babek — or, indeed, if I were interpreting it correctly, even before that. And yet for me to accept the scroll for what it purported to be was at least on a par with my accepting without question everything that had happened to me since I had awoken to find myself where I now was.

There were only twelve pictures on the parchment though there was space for fully double that number. The first two showed a British officer with two native servants engaged in taking survey readings in places I immediately recognized as lying on my route into the Zagros. The third showed the same officer (now indisputably identifiable as myself) leading a panniered mule and preceded by four cloaked figures as he made his way through the snow to the palace gateway. The fourth and fifth pictures depicted the banquet and the advent of the Anahita. The sixth represented my first visit to the loom. The seventh and eighth showed Anahita and myself making love together. The ninth was of myself confronting Anahita with a dead heron lying at my feet. The tenth was of Anahita handing me a scroll (whether this or another I could not tell). The eleventh showed me in the act of mounting the ladder on the loom, and the last saw me standing gazing disconsolately out of a ring of pillars which completely surrounded me like the bars of a circular cage.

The anonymous artist who was responsible for the pictures had left six meticulously outlined but otherwise empty rectangles in the places where the series might have been expected to continue. Was I therefore meant to conclude that I had reached my destined end? I did not think so. Whoever had drawn these pictures had known that I would come to this spot and (if I interpreted the study aright) was perfectly familiar with its unique character.

I sat down in the hammock and stared at the first of the blank spaces, trying to conjure up the design that might have filled it while at the same time being moved to wonder why the artist had chosen to depict me as peering *out* of the cage, when, if I was correct, this particular prison possessed neither an "out" nor an "in."

I returned my attention to the last picture in the sequence and began to examine it minutely, holding it up to my eyes and scanning each area for its smallest detail.

Almost at once I perceived that, ly-

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ing at the feet of the prisoner, was a lilliputian scroll, presumably the very one which I was even now holding in my hands. It was unrolled and I did not doubt that had I possessed a strong magnifying glass I would have detected, reproduced in minuscule upon it, the precise picture I was now studying. Even with my naked eye I could still make out enough to realize that the tiny scroll in the picture contained far more drawings than the one I was holding, though, naturally, I was quite unable to make out what they might represent.

My vision soon began to blur and, seeking to ease the strain upon my eyes, I dropped the scroll into the hammock at my side, raised my hands, and began gently to massage my closed eyelids with the soft flesh at the heels of my palms.

Hardly had I commenced this soothing, kneading action than, as sometimes happens, little twinkling sparks of light began to appear like stars in the darkness before me. But instead of pricking out here and there in the usual haphazard manner, these assumed a definite pattern like a row of tiny pearls strung out along a necklace.

I removed my hands and opened my eyes, whereupon the lights immediately vanished. As soon as I covered my eyes, there they were back again. I began to experiment, turning my head from side to side while still keeping my eyes tightly closed. Sure enough, I soon discovered yet more points of light stretching out in faint lines all about me like a dim, dew-spangled cobweb, or the pearly spokes of some weird and ghostly wheel.

Unable to imagine what they might portend, I opened my eyes, picked up the scroll again and tried to recall anything that Anahita had ever told me about the loom. The words *Cinvat* and *Zurvan* hovered over all like nebulous interrogation marks. *Cinvat*, the Bridge between this world and the next. Was *this Cinvat?* This cage which was no cage; this endless procession of identical pillars; this silent, luminous paradox which appeared to exist in some strange underworld of its own? And what of Zurvan? He whom I had challenged in thoughtless bravado to do his pagan worst? *He is Time itself, Or'mond: the Father of all the gods ... Are thine ears blocked with wax that thou canst not hear what I say to thee? I tell thee thou art marked out for Zurvan!* I shivered violently and, flinging the scroll to the floor, fell back and closed my eyes, praying with a fervor forgotten since the far off days of my childhood that God the Father and God the Son would hear me and take pity on me in the hour of my need.

No sooner had I surrendered myself into the hands of Divine Providence, than a merciful calmness descended upon me, and with it a profound lassitude of mind and body which I found impossible to resist.

I did not sleep, though, at that time, had anyone thought to question

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me I should certainly have insisted that I had; for I still believed that, in all essentials, I was still the same Major Charles Henry Ormond who had so recently triangulated the length of the Rubeh valley and had leveled his theodolite upon the peak of Shir Knh. All men are the bond slaves of their own physical perceptions and, as Anahita justly remarked, only think that they are wise.

So let me aver that I lay in the state I would once have called "sleep" for a period of time which my watch might well have insisted was two or three hours if it had been functioning correctly. I was still "deaf" when I awoke. I consulted my watch and found that it had stopped with its hands registering the ridiculous hour of ten minutes past three. When I began to wind it up, I found that the spring was completely run down. Furthermore, to my profound consternation, I discovered that the mechanism had suffered severe damage, for no sooner had I removed the key from its socket than the hands began to race around the dial like the arms of a whirligig. Ruefully I restored the broken instrument to my fob pocket and tried once again to come to terms with my extraordinary situation.

For want of some better occupation I decided to test out my theory of the physical curvature of the area in which I found myself. To do this I set about pacing out one hundred yards from the hammock and there I placed the scroll case upright upon the flagstone. I then strode back to my starting point, lay down on the ground, and with my eye at floor level attempted some rough estimate of the degree of arcuation. There apperaed to be none at all. I moved the case a further hundred paces and tried again and still there was nothing.

On the point of abandoning my investigation in despair, I decided to continue on outwards from my starting point. When I reached a position where the pillars appeared to vanish from my sight, I marked the direction of the hammock by means of a penciled arrow on the floor; then I sat down and slowly rotated my body through a full 360 degree circle. If my earlier hypothesis was correct, I was now on the other side of the sphere at approximately the opposite pole to that which I had left. Yet, if that were so, it was absolutely impossible that the curvature would remain imperceptible. *Ergo*, my senses were deceiving me and I was the victim of an incredible optical illusion.

Having come to this somewhat obvious conclusion, I next attempted to ascertain the manner in which the illusion was being contrived. The only possible explanation was that, in some manner, the light was responsible. I stared up at the equable luminosity overhead and then, on a sudden impulse, rose to my feet, retrieved the leather scroll case, and hurled it upwards as hard as I was able.

Ever since I had first become con-

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scious of the light, I had supposed that behind or above it there must exist some sort of a ceiling which corresponded in some sense with the stone floor below. Only in this way could I relate my present situation to that which had immediately preceded it. I was still obstinately convinced that there was a direct physical link between the place I was in and the cavern which contained the loom. Anything else would have been literally unthinkable. Thus, as I flung that leather case upwards, it was in the confident expectation that it would strike the invisible ceiling and come tumbling back at my feet. What happened was that it simply disappeared.

I was far more deeply shocked than I would have supposed possible. For some minutes I simply stood, gaping foolishly upwards, waiting for the thing to reappear. When finally it became obvious to me that this was not going to happen, I turned on my heel and walked slowly back towards the hammock. There, lying in the precise center of the net, was the leather case!

I approached it, stared at it incredulously for fully a minute, and then, very gingerly, picked it up and examined it. As far as I could ascertain, it was exactly as it had been when it had last left my hand.

As soon as I had sufficiently recovered from my astonishment, I tried the experiment again, this time standing only some four or five yards distant from the hammock. I think I was expecting to see the case drop down into the net from above, whereas what happened was that it simply *appeared* there, materialized out of thin air, as though the "ceiling" and the hammock occupied one and the same identical area of space, which I knew full well to be impossible.

But it started me off thinking about the nature of space in a way I had never thought about it before. I repeated the experiment at least a dozen times, always with the same "impossible"result, until in the end I knew that it was not impossible at all. It happened, and I had no option but to accept that it happened, if for no better reason than that I could not imagine a way in which such an effect could be produced by purely illusory means. But, if this were so, had the same fate befallen me? Had I too simply materialized within that net, scooped up like some hapless salmon from a stream? And, if so, by what power had it been accomplished? And for what purpose? To at least one of those questions I was soon to learn the answer.

I was pacing back and forth along the pillared aisle, sunk deep in melancholy, when I noticed that the quality of the light was altering. Hitherto it had possessed no special color unless it could be described as a sort of pearly grey; now I perceived that it was changing to a greyish blue and that the confines of the horizon were slowly

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closing in upon me. It was such a very gradual process that it may well have been going on for some considerable time before I became aware of it. I made my way back to the hammock and, with mounting curiosity, sat down to await events.

Two by two, like derelict stanchions sinking beneath a waveless tide, the pillars slowly withdrew themselves from my sight. At last I found myself seemingly suspended in the center of a completely spherical bubble of pale indigo mist which, intensifying moment by moment, had soon achieved the quality of a profound summer's twilight. As the darkness grew ever deeper, the faint pinpoints of spectral light that I had detected earlier now began to emerge from amidst the gloom until, like threads of twinkling gossamer, they were stretching out around me, layer upon layer, in every direction. So taken was I by this beautiful and unearthly vision that I experienced little more than a vague twinge of apprehension when the darkness closed in completely upon me and I found myself an integral part of it.

At once, as though some invisible shackle had been loosed, I sensed that I had been freed from my cage. No command was given; no word spoken; yet I experienced an awareness of liberation so profound that it is beyond my power to describe it. All I can say is that in the flicker of an eye I had become volatile, ethereal, one element with the element I moved in.

Rayed out all around me I beheld the tiered strands of the web, an immense and intricately structured net, woven from wispy tendrils of pure light. Wherever the threads intersected, brilliantly colored crystals winked and trembled like sunstruck raindrops. Drawn thither by some fierce new hunger of the spirit, I reached out with my shadow hands, plucked the first crystal I came to, and peered into its depths.

Suspended within it like some strange barbaric jewel was a tiny silver vessel. Part boat, part bird, part fish, it was winging its way through an ebony emptiness where the stars did not twinkle but burned only with a hard, cold, blue-white light.

By turning the crystal over I was able to examine the mysterious little craft from every angle and to observe that faint lights were glimmering within it. From tubes along the backs of the wings, frail streamers of pale blue fire were issuing forth and it was presumably from these that it derived the motive power which was thrusting it onwards through the vacant darkness towards its unknown destination.

I returned the jewel to its setting and moved on, searching for I knew not what, and so came to its neighbor. That too I seized upon avidly only to find myself confronted by a tangled labyrinth of fanged and rusting wires in which a dreadful piece of carrion that had once been a man, flapped and greyly rotted. In a noisome pool below it floated other unspeakable things —

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things blown up like gross bladders into obscne parodies of the living men they had once been.

I was no stranger to war. A dozen times I had seen Death stalk the field of battle in a hundred different guises. I knew well enough the shape of human pain and suffering. But this was the very sewage of Armageddon; beyond all meaning; shameful; unforgivable. A terrible helpless pity overwhelmed me, and I would have hidden the sight from my eyes had I been able to do it. Less than a human eye, I lacked the refuge of human tears. All around me other crystals winked and beckoned, but I shrank away, sick at heart, dreading what I might find lurking within them.

It was then that I realized I was not alone. Along the filaments of the web other shadowy figures were moving. I saw some gathered in faint clusters here and there, drawn like dim moths to share a jewel of particular brightness. By observing these wanderers of the web I learnt what I had become.

One and all, we lacked those details of form and feature that mark us out as individual members of our species. Our eyes were large and uniformly dark; our mouths, ears, and noses small and of an almost childlike delicacy; and there was no trace of hair upon our heads or our frail, sexless bodies. Our stature, as close as I could judge, approximated to that of a ten-year-old child.

Observing or sensing my distress, one of my companions approached me. Extending its hands it gently touched my face. I felt the caress like a faint, cool breath and found it strangely comforting. I allowed the little creature to take my hand in its own and lead me out along one of the faintly rippling filaments to where a jewel shimmered like a rainbow firefly. Releasing my hand, my companion lifted the gem from its resting place and presented it to me, indicating that it wished me to share whatever was within.

I lowered my face to the glittering surface and beheld what I at first supposed to be a swarm of brilliant butterflies, floating and twirling high in the air above a green mountain valley. On closer examination I perceived that what I had taken for insects were, in fact, delicate machines, like huge silken kites, and that each one carried its own rider who, by means of skillful manipulation of rods and wires, controlled the graceful antics of his winged steed.

So absorbed was I in observing this strange and fascinating aerial ballet that, until I thought to offer back the jewel, I did not notice my companion had wandered off. Finding myself once more alone, I restored the crystal to its place and essayed my first tentative exploration of the nature of the web.

Almost at once I stumbled upon a fact so obvious and yet, to me, so incredible that, upon reflection, it puts me in mind of nothing so much as one of those illusory puzzles with which we

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tease ourselves in childhood. Viewed in one way the picture represents a Greek urn; viewed in another it is a pair of symmetrical human profiles. Both are contained within it; only the perception of the beholder has altered. And thus it was with myself and the web. Up to that instant in time I had seen it only as some weird and marvelously luminous reticulation whose origin and purpose were as mysterious as its nature: *suddenly I perceived that the jewels in the web corresponded to the lights of Anahita's palace!*

Even though I was now aware of — even, in a sense, reconciled to — my own spiritual translation, the effect upon me of my revelation was cataclysmic. As though by a brilliant lightning flash the whole miraculous interrelation of the two structures was suddenly illuminated and made plain to me. The dark navel of the web — the Bridge *Cinvat* — that mysterious hub of physical paradox through which I had wandered — this corresponded to — indeed *was* — the very loom itself! Though contiguous, web and loom existed in separate dimensions. Each was the other's astral twin.

I now understood that those empty, echoing corridors down which I had walked with Anahita and Sh'ula could have been no more than the merest fraction of the true reality. The whole mountain must have been honeycombed with tunnels, cavern upon cavern, each one bearing along its walls its own chain of wavering flares.

The Web of the Magi! For what strange streams, what currents in what seas, had this wonder been contrived? Spun out of light and air, bedewed with crystals, gleaned by ethereal shadows. For thousands of years it had lain here, mysterious, beautiful, unknown to any but the devotees of its extraordinary cult. But what was its purpose? Had it once been an oracle like that at Delphi? Had the Anahitas been the sibyls to whom the kings and emperors of ancient times had crept in fear and trembling to learn what the Fates held in store for them? Or was it some strange immortal Argus, scanning with its impartial myriad eyes all the infinite works and wonders of God? Those who must once have known the answers to such questions had vanished long ago. Now only the inscrutable miracle remained; itself its own purpose.

And so I too became a gleaner of the web. In that dim twilit world where one knew neither cold nor heat, nor thirst nor weariness, I floated moth-like from jewel to jewel, sipping the bewildering nectar from the blossoms of future time. The visions I garnered, drained from my memory, were fed to the dark souls of the *haoma* dreamers, who supplied the pattern for the fabric in the invisible loom.

But though I carried out my simple tasks like all the others, unlike them I could never accept that the world of flesh and blood was lost to me forever.

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Striving to distinguish the substance beneath the shadow, I at last discovered that if I allowed myself to glance sideways out of the corners of my eyes, to perceive, as it were, obliquely, without consciously looking, I was still able to trace some of the spectral outlines of the world I had left.

A sad and lingering hunger began to drive me back to haunt those darkest spaces of the web where, faint as if drawn in water, fainter even than the faintest starlight, the ghostly fabric of the palace palely glimmered. I became a phantom wanderer among insubstantial corridors and drifted, less even than a wraith, through once massive walls which now, like veils of barely perceptible smoke, offered not the slightest resistance to my passing.

And there it was that I at last came upon Anahita.

I saw her fainter than mist breathed upon a windowpane. She was standing on the balcony outside the state apartment, gazing out towards the distant valley over the ghostly tops of the flowering mulberry trees. Unable to restrain myself I reached out to her, willing her to turn and acknowledge my presence.

My thin ghost's arms slipped through the vacant air.

A sort of frantic, silent, twittering fled out along all the filaments of the web, and I sensed rather than saw a host of anguished gleaners rising up like a grey cloud and bearing down upon me.

Perhaps some faint tremor of my passionate yearning did break through and touch her. All I know for sure is that just as the first of the gleaners reached me and began tugging me away, Anahita turned hesitantly towards me, and in the instant of her turning I saw that she was already many months with child.

As they hurried me off towards the dark center of the web, I glanced back. The palace was no longer discernible, but I saw that several of the jewels in the area where I had been had dimmed to mere shadows of their former brilliance. I felt sure that I was in some way responsible and I did not care. I had seen Anahita and I was convinced, beyond all possibility of a doubt, that the child she was nurturing in her womb would be mine.

Although I never discovered which law it was that I had broken, I suspect that my transgression had long been prefigured somewhere in the strands of the web and was thus already familiar to them. Or perhaps they saw me as representing that vital flaw which must forever prevent Man from usurping the sole privilege of God. But was I brought to trial? Did I plead my innocence? Did *she* plead on my behalf? Was there a judgment? A sentence? I think I once knew the answers to all those questions but know them no longer. Between what was and what is falls the shadow.

In their own fashion they have been

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both just and merciful. Although I have been forbidden all further access to the web, they have allowed me — have, indeed, encouraged me — to record this account of all that took place, even though I cannot imagine that anyone except myself will ever read it.

And I am sure they have made use of me in their own inscrutable ways, for how else can I account for what has happened to me since? Sometimes I am half convinced that it was but a moment ago that I was standing at Anahita's side gazing up in amazement at the loom in the Great Hall; at others I seem dimly to perceive that aeons have passed, that whole civilizations have come and gone around me, blooming and withering like flowers, blown and scattered to the four quarters by the witless winds. Have I not seen mountains rise and sink again beneath the waves? Witnessed the jostling and heaving of huge continents? Beheld the very stars of heaven, broken loose from their moorings, wandering without pattern or purpose about the sky? Cast adrift in the whirlpools of time, drowned in delirium times without number, I struggled to the shore and survived.

Now I have finally reached the end of this history, but not yet the end of my journey. To that there is no end fixed, only a new beginning. Soon they will come for me and lead me out, blind in the darkness, until I am standing once more upon *Cinvat*. In my hands they will place the cord which will guide me through the throbbing labyrinth to where she will be waiting. And there at last, purged of all recollection, helpless, fearful, naked and alone, I will begin my final struggle to re-enter the world of the living through the only gateway left to me; spirit made flesh once more in the dark sanctuary of her blood and pain: the last Gift of the Magi.

Coming next month

Featured in the July issue are two fine novelets: "As A Man Has A Whale A Love Story," the final story in the Starfinder series by **Robert F. Young.** Also, "Strata," from Nebula-award winner **Edward Bryant.** The July issue is on sale June 3. Or use the coupon on page 116.

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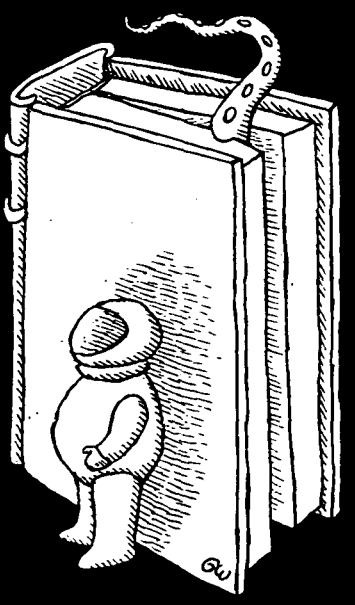
Books

MICHAEL BISHOP



Tales of Nevèrÿon by Samuel R. Delany, Bantam, $2.25.

An Infinite Summer by Christopher Priest, Scribners, $8.95.

The Dancers of Arun by Elizabeth A. Lynn, Berkley/Putnam, $10.95.

The Merman's Children by Poul Anderson, Berkley/Putnam, $11.95.

Lord of the Hollow Dark by Russell Kirk, St. Martins Press, $10.95.

Malafrena by Ursula K. Le Guin, Berkley/Putnam, $11.95.

All good creative talents are idiosyncratic, but some are more idiosyncratic than others.

What prompts this cockeyed, quasi-Orwellian observation?

The books at hand, but principally *Tales of Nevèrÿon* by Samuel R. Delany, one of this field's most self-conscious, intellectually inquisitive, and idiosyncratic artists. Delany has always enjoyed poking an impudent finger at the rubbery barricades of sf, for which reason his each successive book has embodied an attempt — whether wholly or only partially effective — to push back or to leap altogether those barricades. Consider this latest offering.

Who else would essay in the span of five interresonating tales and a scholarly *mock*-scholarly appendix the creation of that rare generic oxymoron, credible sword and sorcery? Who else would festoon that effort, put forward by both Bantam and the author as science fiction, with epigrams from

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such initially daunting sources as Jacques Derrida's *Of Grammatology*, Michael Foucault's *The Archeology of Knowledge*, and several highfalutin others? And who else, having thus flaunted his own erudition, would then consistently purvey such knuckleheaded spellings as "boney," "smokey," and "ropey"? This last idiosyncracy may be dopey (an accepted spelling, strangely enough), but the others are admirable, and I very much like what Delany has accomplished here.

First, *Tales of Nevèrÿon* presents itself as a thoughtful alternative to the barbarian-uber-alles fantasy worlds inhabited by Conan and such latter-day hypostases of the Conan mythos as Brak, Thonger, Kane, *et al.*, *ad nauseam*. Gorgik, the slave who becomes a soldier through the intercession of the Vizerine Myrgot, resembles these brutish fellows physically, but Delany is more interested in documenting the forces that "civilize" him than in repeatedly posing him astride bloody beaucoups of decapitated adversaries. Indeed, civilization and its discontents — civilization and its impedimenta — are a major thematic concern here. Further, recognizing that the world is infinitely more various than Robert E. Howard ever knew, or at least chose to acknowledge, Delany keeps Gorgik off-stage in two of this volume's longest and most inventive sections, "The Tale of Old Venn" and "The Tale of Potters and Dragons," which skillfully illuminate the personalities of three remarkable women.

Second, in a field where the demands of headlong narrative too often overbalance every other literary consideration, Delany has the courage to dawdle and divagate. To unify a host of divergent melodies, he employs motifs — money, mirrors, toy rubber balls — as a musician might. He indulges in brief auctorial lectures (there's a nice one on storytelling conventions in "The Tale of Old Venn") as if he were, say, Henry Fielding; and he does not quail to wield, consciously, the twin-bladed sword of symbolism. The astrolabe that Gorgik wears as a gorget, for instance, ties him to the mines like a slave collar even as it implies a civilized allegiance to technology and the stars. On every page, then, *Tales of Nevèrÿon* is a book that recognizes and idiosyncratically signals its existence as a literary constuct.

In the end the self-consciousness of what could have easily become a mannerist exercise is redeemed through honest feeling and Delany's palpable joy in the game of creation. Although Gorgik, Old Venn, Small Sarg, and Raven do not strike me as "real" people in any conventional sense, they attain — as well they should — a kind of *heightened* reality against the backdrop of Nevèrÿon itself, Delany's fictional universe. Fine. This selective heightening of experience, after all, has always been the province and the pride of art.

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* * *

From Nevèrÿon to the Dream Archipelago.

Like Delany, Christopher Priest is a studied and self-conscious writer, but one whose work often betrays an elegant meticulousness that may seem, at first, bloodless in comparison. This approach has its own virtues. The five stories comprising *An Infinite Summer*, despite their collective title, are cold and gemlike, careful ice carvings rather than exuberantly thrown pottery wares. Their fragility — the suspicion that too intense a beam of scrutiny may cause them to melt — is an integral part of their attractiveness.

Two stories lie outside Priest's discontinuous Dream Archipelago cycle; both involve unusual variations on the worthy sf theme of time manipulation.

In "An Infinite Summer" intruders from the future roam the past (which invariably, of course, is someone else's present) creating beautiful and/or bizarre human tableaux — frozen moments — with small, hand-held instruments, like so many medium-cool photo-journalists abstracting reality from itself with their Nikons. Each tableau is invisible to the inhabitants of the era from which it has been taken, but Priest's protagonist, Thomas Lloyd, becomes sensitive to these images after the partial "erosion" of a moment in which he himself had been held captive for thirty-two years. This is at heart a love story, but it acquires a lingering resonance from the behavior of the mysterious, tomorrow-sent agents who abjure human emotion in order to record it. This question nags: Are we on the road to meeting our future selves in the persons of Priest's amoral freezers?

"Palely Loitering," which like "The Watched" first appeared in this magazine, is a tale of love temporarily thwarted in a park where Yesterday, Today, and Tomorrow are not merely themes but accessible conditions. You can get to Yesterday or Tomorrow; for instance, by crossing a bridge. Priest's juggling of the possibilities inherent in this premise is both dizzying and neat, neat to the point of patness. No matter. A modicum of human feeling is here to undercut the cleverness with passion, and the prose is simultaneously lustrous and spare.

The remaining three "loosely linked" stories are "Whores," "The Negation," and "The Watched." Writes Priest in his introduction, "The Dream Archipelago is more an idea than an actual place.... Do not, please, make assumptions about one story from reading another; there are very few 'links.'" My favorite is "The Negation," even though in her *F&SF* review of Priest's anthology *Anticipations* Joanna Russ characterized it as "pure smeerp, a fake-European allegory that could easily happen in a real country and ought to" (June, 1979). The story is *not* science fiction, but it does employ a distancing technique similar to that exploited by Ursula Le

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Guin in *Orsinian Tales*. To my mind the situation detailed in "The Negation" sacrifices not a whit of immediacy by unraveling against an invented backdrop. The bottom line, I think, is that the story *works*.

Likewise "Whores," although the "synaesthetic gas" to which Priest's narrator-protagonist has been exposed seems oddly old-hat in 1980, with a special indebtedness to Aldiss's *Barefoot in the Head* and perhaps Norman Spinrad's "All the Sounds of the Rainbow."

A Hugo nominee last year, "The Watched" has probably been more widely acclaimed than any other piece of Priest's short fiction. It successfully creates a mood of erotic menace through its first fifty or so pages, only to sabotage this mood with an overblown culminating image: that of a naked Qataari woman buried beneath a mound of rose petals with only her eyes exposed. This may be thematically pertinent, but the practical correlative of such an image — which Priest repeats at the novella's close — may well provoke an involuntary snigger.

A shame, for the rare and exquisite chamber music of *An Infinite Summer* concludes with an ignominious blat. At least to my ear. Many others have been enthralled from beginning to end, and I therefore urge you to listen to Priest's idiosyncratic melodies for yourselves.

* * *

From the Dream Archipelago to Scotland, via stops in the Land of Arun and the realm of Fairie.

The Dancers of Arun by Elizabeth A. Lynn is the second volume of The Chronicles of Tornor, a trilogy. Touted by Berkley as yet another self-contained "fantasy universe," the Land of Arun functions — quite realistically — as an agrarian and pretechnological mercantile society with no supernatural aspects but the untoward psychic abilities of some of its citizens. These people are called witches, one of whom, Kerris, is a one-armed, 17-year-old boy who must learn to develop his gift. Another special feature of Arun's society is the presence of small groups of dancing warriors whose performances partake of and symbolize the harmonizing principle, or *chea*, implicit in nature itself. I am reminded of the Taoist elements in Le Guin's work.

Lynn's identifying idiosyncracy — particularly as a trilogist, an insanely proliferating species nowadays — is her adept, low-key handling of character. Here, three of her major characters are homosexuals, all of whom legitimately earn our sympathy by their virtues as human beings, their incidental sexual wiring be damned; none is a stereotype. In addition, the reciprocal erotic love between Kerris and his older brother Kel dissolves the more lurid implications of "homosexual incest" by the unflinching sureness of its presentation. Unless your prejudices are in-

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tractable and callous, you will like these people, as you will like Gorgik and Small Sarg in Delany's book.

Lynn writes a crisp, evocative prose — "The moon drove its white prow through the trees" — about which my only complaint is that it sometimes edges toward a numbing staccato cadence, *subject-verb-object, subject-verb-object*, which she usually has the good sense to vary or interrupt. Her story is loose and episodic, but in the same involving way that *The Sun Also Rises* is loose and episodic. I now intend to go back and read *Watchtower*, the first novel in this series.

Two more fantasies, both set in the real world but having commerce with more magical or darker kingdoms: Poul Anderson's *The Merman's Children*, which recreates medieval Scandinavia, Greenland, and Yugoslavia in order to chronicle the fading of the realm of Fairie from Christendom; and Russell Kirk's *Lord of the Hollow Dark*, which takes several unsavory representatives of contemporary humanity beneath a crumbling Scottish house (Balgrummo Lodging) in order to recreate the peculiar literary effects of a tale by Ann Radcliffe or Clara Reeve. Interestingly, both these novels have serious religious overtones, employing orthodox Christianity as either a repressive contrast to a more elemental way of life (Anderson) or a standard against which to measure the depth of humanity's fall from grace (Kirk). I like both books, although each has minor flaws that temper my admiration.

Anderson has been tweaked before about wrapping himself in the cloak of the venerable saga-spinner, and he has done that here, too, I'm afraid. Such archaisms as "belike," "bedight," "erelong," and "naught save," especially when they occur in exposition rather than dialogue, often reek of midnight oil rather than the sweat of smithies and the perfume of courtiers. Anderson uses these terms correctly, of course, but I wish that he had refrained. I hasten to add that my quibble is a minor one. *The Merman's Children* pretty much overcomes this idiosyncratic failing and unrolls a genuinely moving story against the rich and well-wrought backdrop of fourteenth-century Europe. If I further state that this may be Anderson's best novel, and undoubtedly his best fantasy, you will comprehend the full extent of my praise.

Lord of the Hollow Dark suffers from being overlong. Kirk keeps his characters nosing about interminably in the labyrinth beneath Balgrummo Lodging, meanwhile revealing layer upon layer of historical background through the ever-flapping lips of Archvicar Gerontion. When his characters begin to convey much of this stygian groping-about in their dialogue — "'You're the next down, Marina. Ah, you've leaped, Coriolan: good man! Here I come'" — it is impossible not to

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suspect that Kirk is groping a little, too.

Nevertheless, it is hard to dislike a book whose characters all take their names from the poetry of T.S. Eliot, and whose author has the savvy, not to mention the gall, to quote Sam the Sham and the Pharoahs as well as Shakespeare and Keats. That kind of idiosyncracy is almost its own justification. Moreover, Kirk provides enough quirky characterization (Apeneck Sweeney as Modern Man, for instance, reprehensible but capable of rehabilitation), enough suspense (will Marina and her baby survive the nefarious scheming of the obsessed Mr. Apollinax?), and a sufficient number of hidden cobwebbed staircases and inexplicable ghostly occurences to keep you reading to the end.

Having already mentioned *Orsinian Tales* in passing, I want to conclude by looking at Ursula K. Le Guin's *Malafrena*, a novel set in Orsinia during the political and social upheavals endemic in Metternich's Europe during the 1820s. This is Le Guin exercising her considerable talent in a work whose chief idiosyncracy may be that it owes more to Tolstoy than to Tolkien. Her Orsinian characters' surnames end with the suffix *-skar* rather than *-kov*, and in their cultural orientations they are naturally rather than affectedly European — but like Tolstoyan dramatis personae they introspectively mull their relationships with both one another and the state, seeking either happiness or justice, if not both, in a society immemorially dedicated to the status quo.

Itale Sorde, Le Guin's protagonist; may well remind some readers of Shevek from *The Dispossessed*, not only in his singleminded pursuit of an ideal and his subsequent persecution for that singlemindedness, but also in the fact that his journey out and back illustrates again that fine Odonian maxim, itself variously prefigured in Eliot's *Four Quartets*, "True journey is return." (I might also note, even though making this comparison says more about me than about the sources of Priest's inspiration, that the novelist Moylita Kaine in "The Negation" seems modeled at least in part on Le Guin herself.) What is new here, apart from the historical setting, is our apprehension that Le Guin has taken an important additional step, for at novel's end Sorde is poised for a further foray into the world outside his beloved Val Malafrena. The *vita nova* is not a will-o'-the-wisp.

At the risk of incurring the ridicule of those amused by old-fashioned concepts of Truth and Honor, I would call *Malafrena* a noble book. It affirms the psychological necessity of lofty aspirations without cringing away from a vivid depiction of the private and public vices that flesh is heir to. It acknowledges but does not surrender to the ubiquity of injustice and suffering. Orsinia may be an imaginary country,

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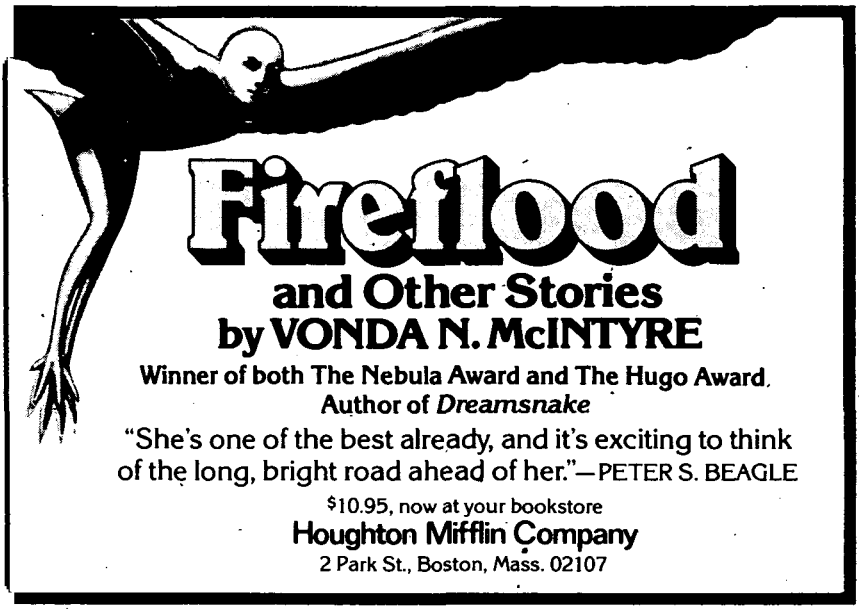
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but what happens there mirrors, and necessarily magnifies, the imperishable realities of the human heart.

Delany's Nevèrÿon, Priest's Dream Archipelago, Lynn's Land of Arun, Anderson's realm of Fairie, and even Kirk's subterranean "Purgatory" beneath an ancient Scottish house are all countries contiguous with Orsinia in the dimension of the imagination. The books themselves are your passports. Bon voyage.

Note: A short time ago (January, 1980) I took Baronet Publishing Company to task for identifying the author of one of its releases as a "Hugo-Award Winner," when that did not happen to be true. Wrote I in imperious innocence, "Were I the author, I would resent this erronious touting...."

Well, my own publisher has gone and given me — not only on the cover of a paperback reprint of mine but in magazine ads plugging that book — both the Hugo *and* the Nebula Awards, neither of which I have ever won. Baronet, this is Berkley. Berkley, this is Baronet. Bishop, by the way, is the one pulling tufts of hair from his head....

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The reaugmented space program had sent two men to Venus. They had spent twelve hours on the surface and had returned suffering from "severe mental disability." Exactly what had happened?

And Then We Went To Venus

BY
BILL PRONZINI

Three weeks after the return of Commander Richard Stiles and Major Philip Webber — the two-man crew of Exploration V, the first manned "supership" to land on Venus — and the sudden, unexplained, and total information blackout by both NASA and Washington, a security leak from "an unimpeachable source" blew the lid off the whole thing. If it had not been for that, the news media and the general population might not have gotten the details on the mission for months or years, if they had gotten them at all.

Until the leak, all any of us knew was that Exploration V had made the Venus landing and in it Stiles and Webber had spent some twelve undocumented hours on the surface of the planet (the ship's entire communication system had malfunctioned shortly after lift-off); that Mission Control had effected Venus lift-off and return; and that re-entry touchdown had been little more than routine. Full news media coverage was encouraged up to that point, of course. We had landed on the moon and we had landed on Mars, and now that government metallurgists had developed a breakthrough alloy able to withstand temperatures in excess of one thousand degrees Fahrenheit, we had landed on Venus — yet another great moment in the history of Mankind. But the official lid dropped and sealed as soon as NASA personnel opened up the capsule. The only other fact we knew for certain was that astronauts Stiles and Webber were alive.

During those three weeks a breathless expectation, and an air of apprehension, gripped the world at large. Why the secrecy, why the silence? I asked those questions myself, in print

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in my syndicated political column, and feared the answers perhaps more than most. I had long been a professional skeptic, about any number of things including certain "blind-leap" aspects of our reaugmented space program. It seemed to me we did too many things on the basis of insufficient data; our thirst for knowledge sometimes took precedence over other considerations, not the least of which was human safety. NASA was as much an offender in this respect as any other government agency.

The *Washington Post* broke the story, in a rare banner headline. Within hours it was on every front page of every newspaper in every nation, and on every television and radio station, and on every tongue.

There were two major revelations.

First, both Commander Stiles and Major Webber had returned from the mission suffering from what was termed "severe mental disability."

And, second, NASA was said to possess a certain amount of evidence that a form of sentient life existed on the planet Venus.

It was, of course, the latter which initiated the most reaction and to which the most lip service was paid. Life on Venus, sentient life on another planet in our solar system; fiction and endless speculation apparently proved fact. It was a startling, exciting, somewhat frightening possibility. What did the life look like? Was it intelligent? If so, could we establish contact? Would it be friendly or unfriendly? What kind of culture could it have on that wet, steaming, vapor-obscured planet? And on and on in constant repetition.

But one of the key questions, as far as I was concerned, was: What had happened to Stiles and Webber?

Economic, civil, political, and personal crises were forgotten; everyone, but everyone, wanted to Know More. NASA and Washington at first attempted to discredit the *Post* report; but, as with the Pentagon Papers and Watergate two decades earlier, the facts discredited the attempt to discredit the facts. The public hue and cry was overwhelming, so much so that it could not be ignored. Ultimately there was nothing NASA and Washington could do, especially in view of the fact that this was an election year, except to yield with a stiff grace.

The President called a closed-door press conference in the White House press room, and my credentials got me a front-row seat. He appeared first and made a few introductory remarks about "the grave importance of the knowledge which may await us in limitless space." After which, wisely, he turned the conference over to uniformed and beribboned General Joseph Meadows, one of the top men in NASA and the head of the Venus Exploration program.

To begin with, Meadows distributed mimeographed copies of a prepared press release which corroborated, in typical vague govern-

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mental fashion, the two main facts reported in the *Post*. The general read the release aloud; then, with some apparent reluctance, he called for questions.

And they came.

"What are the physical characteristics of the life on Venus, General?"

"I am unable to answer that question. We simply do not know."

"It *is* sentient, however, is that correct?"

"We believe that it may be."

"Could it be intelligent?"

"We don't know and cannot speculate."

"Just what leads you to believe that a life form exists on Venus?"

"We have certain photographic evidence, recorded by the automatic cameras on Exploration Five, which bears out that supposition."

"What sort of photographic evidence?"

"The film in question depicts a certain blurred activity on the portion of the planet's day-side land surface where the ship touched down."

"Cities, do you mean? A culture of some kind?"

"No. Activity, movement — simply that."

"Can't you be more specific?"

"I'm sorry, I cannot."

"Was similar photographic evidence transmitted by the cameras in the unmanned Exploration Three and Exploration Four capsules?"

"It was not."

"How do you account for that, sir?"

"I can only say that the Exploration Five landing took place at a markedly different spot on Venus than did either of the other two landings. Previous photographs, plus radar maps of the planet's surface and other recorded data, prepared us to believe that there were no life forms of any kind."

"What can you tell us about the surface of Venus, other than what we already know?"

"At this time, nothing at all."

"Is another Exploration mission being planned for the near future?"

"An announcement as to future plans will be made shortly."

"Assuming the life form is intelligent, will efforts be made to establish contact?"

"Certainly. But we have no current basis for such an assumption. We are proceeding one step at a time."

"About Commander Stiles and Major Webber, sir," I said. "What can you tell us about the nature of their illnesses?"

"Not a great deal, I'm afraid. Exhaustive tests are still being undertaken."

"Both men *are* alive?"

"Yes."

"What form of mental disorder is each suffering from?"

Pause. "Major Webber's condition may be loosely described as catatonic; Commander Stiles' condition as semi-catatonic."

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"Does that mean you've been able to communicate with the commander?"

"No, it does not."

"Well, has he been lucid at any time?"

"I am not at liberty to answer that question."

"Have you been able to learn anything from him about what happened on Venus?"

"I am not at liberty to answer that."

"General, what do you suppose is responsible for these similar psychological disorders in Stiles and Webber? Based on available information, that is."

"All available information is still being tabulated; at present we have been able to draw no definite conclusions. However, it is possible that spatial stresses may be a primary factor."

"Isn't it rather improbable, sir, that two well-trained men would succumb to spatial stresses in the same way at approximately the same time?"

"The existence of sentient life on Venus is rather improbable. And yet it may one day prove to be a fact."

"What about other possible explanations?" someone else asked. "Could these mental disorders have been caused by something of a physical nature? The 900-degree surface temperature, for example?"

"Negative. The Exploration Five capsule was not heat-damaged in any way; Commander Stiles and Major Webber did not leave the ship and could not have been affected by outside temperatures while inside it. And were not, as tests have proven."

"Magnetic fields or solar winds, then? The planet's atmosphere is composed of carbon dioxide and sulfuric acid, after all...."

"Also negative. Harmful atmospheric elements could not have penetrated or affected conditions inside the capsule."

"Do you have any idea *when* either man was stricken?"

"We do not."

"Could it have happened prior to landing on Venus?"

"That is unlikely. Despite the malfunction of the communications system, both men performed other duties according to schedule."

"But they did not perform any duties after Mission Control effected lift-off from Venus for the return flight?"

"Correct."

"Then the mental disabilities occurred during the twelve hours Exploration Five was on the planet itself."

"It would appear so, yes."

I asked, "Have you considered the possibility, sir, that the alleged Venus life form was in some way responsible for the breakdowns of the two men?"

"We have, just as we have considered every other possibility. And we find it negative as well. There is no way a life form of any kind, not even a microscopic organism, could have pen-

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etrated the seal on the capsule. Exploration Five's instruments are highly sophisticated; they would have recorded — and we would subsequently have found — any evidence of such a penetration."

"Can you tell us, please, where Commander Stiles and Major Webber are now undergoing treatment?"

"I'm afraid not. That is classified information."

"Would it be possible for members of the media to see either or both of them?"

"At this time it would not."

It was anything but an enlightening session. We took what little Meadows had given us and passed it along to the hungry populace, but no one was satisfied. A little knowledge can be more provocative than no knowledge at all, as NASA's scientists knew better than anyone; in a situation of this magnitude, it only served to escalate matters into a fever pitch.

More pressure was applied from groups and factions and individuals. Politicians up for re-election, particularly those from the party out of power, seized the opportunity to make "the Venus life question" a major political issue. There was a kind of mass hysteria involved in all of this — a quivering excitement, a delicious fear. The silent cry from all sides seemed to be: "Tell us the worst, if that's what it is. Scare hell out of us, we can take it. Just don't keep us in the dark."

The furor brought results, after a fashion. NASA and Washington steadfastly refused to release any further details, or to embelish on those few which General Meadows had given out. They maintained the position that when they had facts, not suppositions, they would release them to the public. But again, because of the political pressure and because it *was* an election year, they had to make some kind of concession. And so they made one.

They agreed to allow a representative cross-section of the media to have a look at, although not to photograph, Commander Richard Stiles and Major Philip Webber.

I was among the seven men and three women chosen for the visit to the Virginia-based, government-maintained medical facility in which the astronauts were undergoing "interim treatment." The selection was supposedly made at random, but, in truth, it was only those of us with upper-echelon clout who were invited. I had to call in two owed favors and make half a dozen promises, and even then I wasn't sure I was going to be included until the day before the visit was scheduled.

It was on a morning exactly five weeks after the return of Exploration V that NASA personnel, operating under tight security measures, escorted the ten of us to the medical facility. Once inside, we were met by Doctor Benjamin Fuller, a government psychol-

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ogist and Ph.D. who specialized in mental disorders and who was in charge of the care and treatment of Stiles and Webber. He allowed us a brief question-and-answer period, but his responses were just as non-committal as General Meadows' had been earlier.

No, he was not prepared to say whether or not either astronaut was responding to treatment, or if any information had been gleaned from them on the Venus landing.

No, he had no opinion at this time as to whether or not a complete or partial cure could be gained in either case.

No, he was not at liberty to divulge the nature of the treatments being used on the two men.

Yes, the official view as to the cause of their disability was still the same: undefined spatial stresses.

Doctor Fuller then conducted us through a maze of sterile hallways, peopled with sterile, plastic-featured medical types. At length we came to a large room which had a kind of drapery drawn across one wall. Fuller asked that we maintain silence and that we line up to file past one at a time; then he went to the wall and opened the drapery.

Behind it was a window — or, rather, a two-way glass which was a window from our side. Through the glass, when my turn came, I saw an oblong white room containing a bed and two tubular chairs and a tubular nightstand. On the bed, motionless, lay Major Philip Webber.

If I had not known he was thirty-six years old, I would have thought he was a man in his sixties. His hair had turned almost white and the skin of his face was loose, wattled; his eyes were blank and fixed, sunken deep in their sockets. He might have been dead except for the rhythmic rise and fall of his chest.

I felt my stomach constrict as I looked at him. A man in superb physical condition, who had undergone rigorous training and test conditioning in preparation for the Exploration V mission. A shell, a vegetable.

As soon as the last of us had had his turn at the glass, Fuller reclosed the drapery and gestured us out into the corridor again. None of us spoke; there was nothing to say. We followed him to another room similar to the first. Here, now, we would see Commander Richard Stiles — the most qualified man in America to captain Man's first landing on Venus, an accomplished logician, a technological genius.

We queued up near the wall and Fuller opened the cloth.

I was last in line this time, but from the faces of the others as they turned away I could tell that, if anything, Stiles was in worse shape than Webber. And he was. When I finally stepped up to the glass, I saw him sitting on a white chair, in profile at the foot of his bed. His hands were clasped so tightly together in his lap that the straining tendons in both wrists were

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visible. Only his lips moved, as if he were muttering to himself. Like Webber's, his eyes stared at nothing — and like Webber, he looked at least twenty years older than his age of forty-one.

My stomach knotted again. I wanted suddenly to get out of that room, out of that building and into the sunlight. I started to turn aside.

Stiles moved.

He came to his feet with startling abruptness, spun out of profile, and took four long steps toward the glass. From his side it was only a mirror returning his own image to him, and yet it was as if he knew or had sensed that someone was there, watching him. A glimmer of intelligence seemed to come into his eyes.

And his mouth opened and framed a word.

If he spoke that word aloud, I couldn't hear it; the room was probably soundproofed. But I saw clearly the movement of his lips, and I understood — was sure I understood — what the word was. It brought chills to my back, made me take an involuntary step backward.

Grim-faced, Doctor Fuller brushed past me and pulled the drapery shut. When I caught his eye, he met my gaze with an expression that revealed nothing. I looked at the others then, but none of them had understood what Stiles had said; I would have seen it in their faces if they had.

"Ladies and gentlemen," Fuller said in the corridor outside, "I must ask you to confine your reports of what you've witnessed here today to factual impressions. Irresponsible speculation of any kind, particularly that based on uncertain visual interpretation, will not be tolerated." He was looking straight at me as he said it.

Once we had been returned to our point of departure in downtown Washington, I left the others, and went to the nearest bar and drank two double bourbons. I was shaken, badly shaken. Fuller had made it clear that there would be severe repercussions if I printed what I thought I'd heard Stiles say; but his warning was unnecessary. I had no intention of printing it.

The public had a right to know, yes; they were desperate to know. *Scare hell out of us, we can take it.* But could they? I wasn't so sure. The implications in that single word were enough to sow the seeds of panic.....

I was about to order a third drink when Joe Anders came into the place. He was another newsman, a UPI correspondent whom I knew on a first-name basis. He sat down next to me and called for a draft beer.

"Little early in the day for you, isn't it?" he asked.

"Not today it isn't."

"That bad, huh?"

"What?"

"Seeing Stiles and Webber."

"Yes," I said. "Very bad."

"Want to talk about it?"

"No."

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"Suit yourself," he said, and shrugged. "Latest poop on the Venus situation is bigger news, anyway."

I sat up straight. "What latest poop?"

"You mean you haven't heard?"

"I haven't checked in with my office. What is it?"

"Well, it's not official yet, but NASA's expected to make the announcement within a week. Plans are under way for Exploration Six, to confirm or deny the Venus life question. Six-man crew this time, including a biologist and a linguist. Just in case."

"Oh my God," I said.

Anders said something else, but I didn't hear it. Six more men, I was thinking. Six more just like Stiles and Webber? And how many after that? How many others before they finally accepted the truth?

If it *was* the truth.

NASA didn't think it was; they knew what I knew, of course, but the possibility was beyond their collective scientific minds. Maybe they were right. I prayed to God they were.

But the image of Stiles' face was sharp and terrible in my mind, and so was that word I believed I had seen him speak. The one figurative word that told nothing and yet may have told everything about what had happened to him and Webber, about what awaited all men who landed on Venus.

The word "Medusa."

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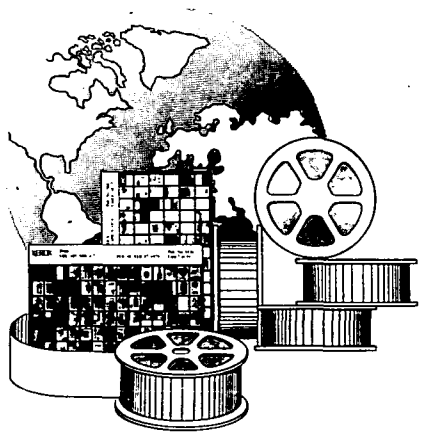

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Lisa Tuttle's last story here was a strong and controversial piece of sf titled "Wives" (December 1979). In her previous stories for F&SF, she demonstrated a fine talent for the contemporary horror tale, like this new chiller you are about to read.

Bug House

BY

LISA TUTTLE

The house was a wreck, resting like some storm-shattered ship on a weedy headland overlooking the ocean. Ellen felt her heart sink at the sight of it.

"This it?" asked the taxi driver dubiously, squinting through his windshield and slowing the car.

"It must be," Ellen said without conviction. She couldn't believe that her aunt — or anyone else — lived in this house.

The house had been built, after the local custom, out of wood, and then set upon cement blocks that raised it three or four feet off the ground. But floods seemed far less dangerous to the house now than the winds, or simply time. The house was crumbling on its blocks. The boards were weatherbeaten and scabbed with flecks of ancient grey paint. Uncurtained windows glared blankly, and one shutter hung at a crazy angle. Between the boards of the sagging, second-story balcony, Ellen could see daylight.

"I'll wait for you," the driver said, pulling up at the end of an overgrown driveway. "In case there's nobody here."

"Thanks," Ellen said, getting out of the back seat and tugging her suit case after her. She counted the fare out into his hand and glanced up at the house. No sign of life. Her shoulders slumped. "Just wait to be sure someone answers the door," she told the driver.

Trudging up the broken cement path to the front door, Ellen was startled by a glimpse of something moving beneath the house. She stopped short and peered ahead at the dark space. Had it been a dog? A child playing? Something large and dark, moving quickly — but it was gone now or in hiding. Behind her, Ellen could hear the taxi idling. For a brief moment she

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considered going back. Back to Danny. Back to all their problems. Back to his lies and promises.

She walked forward again, and when she reached the porch she set her knuckles against the warped, grey door and rapped sharply, twice.

An old, old woman, stick-thin and obviously ailing, opened the door. Ellen and the woman gazed at each other in silence.

"Aunt May?"

The old woman's eyes cleared with recognition, and she nodded slightly. "Ellen, of course!"

But when had her aunt grown so old?

"Come in, dear." The old woman stretched out a parchment claw. At her back, Ellen felt the wind. The house creaked, and for a moment Ellen thought she felt the porch floor give beneath her feet. She stumbled forward, into the house. The old woman — her aunt, she reminded herself — closed the door behind her.

"Surely you don't live here all alone," Ellen began. "If I'd known — if dad had known — we would have...."

"If I'd needed help I would've asked for it," Aunt May said with a sharpness that reminded Ellen of her father.

"But this house," Ellen said. "It's too much for one person. It looks like it might fall down at any minute, and if something should happen to you here, all alone...."

The old woman laughed, a dry, papery rustle. "Nonsense. This house will outlast me. And appearances can be deceiving. Look around you — I'm quite cozy here."

Ellen saw the hall for the first time. A wide, high-ceilinged room with a brass chandelier and a rich oriental carpet. The walls were painted a cream color, and the grand staircase looked in no danger of collapse.

"It does look a lot better inside," Ellen said. "It looked deserted from the road. The taxi driver couldn't believe anyone lived here."

"The inside is all that matters to me," said the old woman. "I have let it all go rather badly. The house is honeycombed with dry rot and eaten by insects, but even so it's in nowhere near as bad shape as I am. It will still be standing when I'm underground, and that's enough for me."

"But, Aunt May...." Ellen took hold of her aunt's bony shoulders. "Don't talk like that. You're not dying."

That laugh again. "My dear, look at me. I am. I'm long past saving. I'm all eaten up inside. There's barely enough of me left to welcome you here."

Ellen looked into her aunt's eyes, and what she saw there made her vision blur with tears.

"But doctors...."

"Doctors don't know everything. There comes a time, my dear, for everyone. A time to leave this life for another one. Let's go in and sit down. Would you like some lunch? You must be hungry after that long trip."

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Feeling dazed, Ellen followed her aunt into the kitchen, a narrow room decorated in greens and gold. She sat at the table and stared at the wallpaper, a pattern of fish and frying pans.

Her aunt was dying. It was totally unexpected. Her father's older sister — but only eight years older, Ellen remembered. And her father was a vigorously healthy man, a man still in the prime of life. She looked at her aunt, saw her moving painfully slowly from cupboard to counter to shelf, preparing a lunch.

Ellen rose. "Let me do it, Aunt May."

"No, no, dear. I know where everything is, you see. You don't. I can still get around all right."

"Does dad know about you? When was the last time you saw him?"

"Oh, dear me, I didn't want to burden him with my problems. We haven't been close for years, you know. I suppose I last saw him — why, it was at your wedding, dear."

Ellen remembered. That had been the last time she had seen Aunt May. She could hardly believe that woman and the one speaking to her now were the same. What had happened to age her so in only three years?

May set a plate on the table before Ellen. A pile of tuna and mayonnaise was surrounded by sesame crackers.

"I don't keep much fresh food on hand," she said. "Mostly canned goods. I find it difficult to get out shopping much anymore, but then I haven't much appetite lately, either. So it doesn't much matter what I eat. Would you like some coffee? Or tea?"

"Tea, please. Aunt May, shouldn't you be in a hospital? Where someone would care for you?"

"I can care for myself right here."

"I'm sure dad and mom would love to have you visit...."

May shook her head firmly.

"In a hospital they might be able to find a cure for you."

"There's no cure for dying except death, Ellen."

The kettle began to whistle, and May poured boiling water over a teabag into a cup.

Ellen leaned back in her chair, resting the right side of her head against the wall. She could hear a tiny, persistent, crunching sound from within the wall — termites?

"Sugar in your tea?"

"Please," Ellen responded automatically. She had not yet touched her lunch and had no desire for anything to eat or drink.

"Oh, dear," sighed Aunt May. "I'm afraid you'll just have to drink it plain. It must have been a very long time since I used this — there are more ants here than sugar grains."

Ellen watched her aunt drop the whole canister into the garbage can.

"Aunt May, is money a problem? I mean, if you're staying here because you can't afford—"

"Bless you, no." May sat down at

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the table beside her niece. "I have some investments and enough money in the bank for my own needs. And this house is my own, too. I bought it when Victor retired, but he didn't stay long enough to help me enjoy it."

In a sudden rush of sympathy, Ellen leaned over and would have taken her frail aunt in her arms, but May fluttered her hand in a go-away motion, and Ellen drew back.

"With Victor dead, some of the joy went out of fixing it up. Which is why it still looks much the same old wreck it was when I bought it. This property was a real steal, because nobody wanted the house. Nobody but me and Victor." May cocked her head suddenly and smiled. "And maybe you? What would you say if I left this house to you when I die?"

"Aunt May, please don't...."

"Nonsense. Who better? Unless you can't stand the sight of it, of course, but I'm telling you the property is worth something, at least. If the house is too far gone with the bugs and the rot, you can pull it down and put up something you and Danny like better."

"It's very generous of you, Aunt May. I just don't like to hear you talk about dying."

"No? It doesn't bother me. But if it disturbs you, then we'll say no more about it. Shall I show you your room?

"I don't go upstairs anymore," May said, leading the way slowly up the staircase, leaning heavily on the banister and pausing often in her climb. "I moved my bedroom downstairs. It was too much trouble to always be climbing up and down."

The second floor smelled strongly of sea-damp and mold.

"This room has a nice view of the sea," May said. "I thought you might like it." She paused in a doorway, gesturing to Ellen to follow. "There are clean linens in the hall closet."

Ellen looked into the room. It was sparely furnished with bed, dressing table and straight-backed chair. The walls were an institutional green and without decoration. The mattress was bare, and there were no curtains at the french doors.

"Don't go out on the balcony — I'm afraid parts of it have quite rotted away," May cautioned.

"I noticed," Ellen said.

"Well, some parts go first, you know. I'll leave you alone now, dear. I'm feeling a bit tired myself. Why don't we both just nap until dinner time?"

Ellen looked at her aunt and felt her heart twist with sorrow at the weariness on that pale, wrinkled face. The small exertion of climbing upstairs had told on her. Her arms trembled slightly, and she looked grey with weariness.

Ellen hugged her. "Oh, Aunt May," she said softly. "I'm going to be a help to you, I promise. You just take it easy. I'll look after you."

May pulled away from her niece's

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arms, nodding. "Yes, dear. It's very nice to have you here. We welcome you." She turned and walked away down the hall.

Alone, Ellen suddenly realized her own exhaustion. She sank down on the bare mattress and surveyed her bleak little room, her mind a jumble of problems old and new.

She had never known her Aunt May well enough to become close to her — this sudden visit was a move born of desperation. Wanting to get away from her husband for a while, wanting to punish him for a recently discovered infidelity, she had cast about for a place she could escape to — a place she could afford, and a place where Danny would not be able to find her. Aunt May's lonely house on the coast had seemed the best possibility for a week's hiding. She had expected peace, boredom, regret — but she had never expected to find a dying woman. It was a whole new problem that almost cast her problems with Danny into insignificance.

Suddenly she felt very lonely. She wished Danny were with her, to comfort her. She wished she had not sworn to herself not to call him for at least a week.

But she would call her father, she decided. Should she warn him against telling Danny? She wasn't sure — she hated letting her parents know her marriage was in trouble. Still, if Danny tried to find her by calling them, they would know something was wrong.

She'd call her father tonight. Definitely. He'd come out here to see his sister — he'd take charge, get her to a hospital, find a doctor with a miracle cure. She was certain of it.

But right now she was suddenly, paralyzingly tired. She stretched out on the bare mattress. She would get the sheets and make it up properly later, but right now she would just close her eyes, just close her eyes and rest for a moment....

It was dark when Ellen woke, and she was hungry.

She sat on the edge of the bed, feeling stiff and disoriented. The room was chilly and smelled of mildew. She wondered how long she had slept.

Nothing happened when she hit the light switch on the wall. So she groped her way out of the room and along the dark hall towards the dimly perceived stairs. The steps creaked loudly beneath her feet. She could see a light at the bottom of the stairs, from the kitchen.

"Aunt May?"

The kitchen was empty, the light a fluorescent tube above the stove. Ellen had the feeling that she was not alone. Someone was watching. Yet when she turned, there was nothing behind her but the undisturbed darkness of the hall.

She listened for a moment to the creakings and moanings of the old house, and to the muffled sounds of sea and wind from outside. No human sound in all of that, yet the feeling per-

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sisted that if she listened hard enough, she would catch a voice....

She could make out another dim light from the other end of the hall, behind the stairs, and she walked toward it. Her shoes clacked loudly on the bare wooden floor of the back hall.

It was a night-lite that had attracted her attention, and near it she saw that a door stood ajar. She reached out and pushed it further open. She heard May's voice, and she stepped into the room.

"I can't feel my legs at all," May said. "No pain in them, no feeling at all. But they still work for me, somehow. I was afraid that once the feeling went they'd be useless to me. But it's not like that at all. But you knew that; you told me it would be like this." She coughed, and there was the sound in the dark room of a bed creaking. "Come here, there's room."

"Aunt May?"

Silence — Ellen could not even hear her aunt breathing. Finally May said, "Ellen? Is that you?"

"Yes, of course. Who did you think it was?"

"What? Oh, I expect I was dreaming." The bed creaked again.

"What was that you were saying about your legs?"

More creaking sounds. "Hmmm? What's that, dear?" The voice of a sleeper struggling to stay awake.

Never mind," Ellen said. "I didn't realize you'd gone to bed. I'll talk to you in the morning. Good night."

"Good night, dear."

Ellen backed out of the dark, stifling bedroom, feeling confused.

Aunt May must have been talking in her sleep. Or perhaps, sick and confused, she was hallucinating. But it made no sense to think — as Ellen, despite herself, was thinking — that Aunt May had been awake and had mistaken Ellen for someone else, someone she expected a visit from, someone else in the house.

The sound of footsteps on the stairs, not far above her head, sent Ellen running forward. But the stairs were dark and empty, and straining her eyes towards the top, Ellen could see nothing. The sound must have been just another product of this dying house, she thought.

Frowning, unsatisfied with her own explanation, Ellen went back into the kitchen. She found the pantry well-stocked with canned goods and made herself some soup. It was while she was eating it that she heard the footsteps again — this time seemingly from the room above her head.

Ellen stared up at the ceiling. If someone was really walking around up there, he was making no attempt to be cautious. But she couldn't believe that the sound was anything but footsteps: someone was upstairs.

Ellen set her spoon down, feeling cold. The weighty creaking continued.

Suddenly the sounds overhead stopped. The silence was unnerving, giving Ellen a vision of a man crouched

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down, his head pressed against the floor as he listened for some response from her.

Ellen stood up, rewarding her listener with the sound of a chair scraping across the floor. She went to the cabinet on the wall beside the telephone — and there, on a shelf with the phonebook, Band-aids and lightbulbs was a flashlight — just as in her father's house.

The flashlight worked, and the steady beam of light cheered her. Remembering that the light in her room hadn't worked, Ellen also took out a lightbulb before closing the cabinet and starting upstairs.

Opening each door as she came to it, Ellen found a series of unfurnished rooms, bathrooms and closets. She heard no further footsteps and found no sign of anyone or anything that could have made them. Gradually, the tension drained out of her, and she returned to her own room after taking some sheets from the linen closet.

After installing the lightbulb and finding that it worked, Ellen closed the door and turned to make up the bed. Something on the pillow drew her attention: examining it more closely, she saw that it seemed to be a small pile of sawdust. Looking up the wall, she saw that a strip of wooden molding was riddled with tiny holes, leaking the dust. She wrinkled her nose in distaste: termites. She shook the pillow vigorously and stuffed it into a case, resolving to call her father first thing in the morning. May could not go on living in a place like this.

Sun streaming through the uncurtained window woke her early. She drifted toward consciousness to the cries of seagulls and the all-pervasive smell of the sea.

She got up, shivering from the dampness which seemed to have crept into her bones, and dressed herself quickly. She found her aunt in the kitchen, sitting at the table and sipping a cup of tea.

"There's hot water on the stove," May said by way of greeting.

Ellen poured herself a cup of tea and joined her aunt at the table.

"I've ordered some groceries," May said. "They should be here soon, and we can have toast and eggs for breakfast."

Ellen looked at her aunt and saw that a dying woman shared the room with her. In the face of that solemn, inarguable fact, she could think of nothing to say. So they sat in a silence broken only by the sipping of tea, until the doorbell rang.

"Would you let him in, dear?" May said.

Ellen rose. "Shall I pay him?"

"Oh, no. He doesn't ask for that. Just let him in."

Wondering, Ellen opened the door on a strongly built young man holding a brown paper grocery bag in his arms. She put out her arms rather hesitantly to receive the groceries, but he ignored her implied offer, walking into the

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house and around her to the kitchen. There he set his bag down and began to unload it. Ellen stood in the doorway watching, noticing that he knew where everything went.

He said nothing to May, who seemed scarcely aware of his presence, but when everything had been put away, he sat down at the table, taking Ellen's place. He tilted his head on one side, eyeing Ellen. "You must be her niece," he said.

Ellen said nothing. She didn't like the way he looked at her. His dark, nearly black eyes seemed to be without pupils — hard eyes, without depths. And he ran those eyes up and down her body, judging her. He smiled now at her silence and turned to May. "A quiet one," he said.

May stood up, holding her empty cup.

"Let me," Ellen said quickly, stepping forward. May handed her the cup and sat down again, still without acknowledging the young man's presence. "Would you like some breakfast?" Ellen asked.

May shook her head. "You eat what you like, dear. I don't feel much like eating ... there doesn't seem to be much point to it."

"Aunt May, you really should eat."

"A piece of toast, then."

"I'd like some eggs," said the stranger. He stretched lazily in his chair. "I haven't had my breakfast yet."

Ellen looked at May, wanting some clue as to how to treat this presumptuous stranger. Was he her friend? A hired man? She didn't want to be rude to him if May didn't wish it. But May was looking into the middle distance, indifferent.

Ellen looked at the man. "Are you waiting to be paid for the groceries?" she asked.

The stranger smiled, a hard smile that revealed a set of even teeth. "I bring food to your aunt as a favor. So she won't have to go to all the trouble of getting it for herself, in her condition."

Ellen stared at him a moment longer, waiting in vain for a sign from her aunt, and then turned her back on them and went to the stove to prepare breakfast. She wondered why this man was helping her aunt — was she really not paying him? He didn't strike her as the sort for disinterested favors.

"Now that I'm here," Ellen said, getting eggs and butter from the refrigerator, "you don't have to worry about my aunt. I can run errands for her."

"I'll have two fried eggs," he said. "I like the yolks runny."

Ellen glared at him, but checked herself. He wasn't likely to leave just because she refused to cook his eggs — he'd probably just cook them himself. And he *had* bought the groceries.

But — her small revenge — she overcooked the eggs and gave him the slightly scorched pieces of toast.

When she sat down at the breakfast

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table, Ellen looked at him challengingly. "I'm Ellen Morrow," she said.

He hesitated just long enough to make her think of asking him his name more directly; then he drawled, "You can call me Peter."

"Thanks a lot," she said sarcastically. He smiled his unpleasant smile again, and Ellen felt him watching her throughout the meal. As soon as she had finished eating, she excused herself, telling her aunt that she was going to call her father.

That drew the first response of the morning from May. She put out a detaining hand, drawing it back just shy of actually touching Ellen. "Please don't worry him about me, Ellen. There's nothing he can do for me, and I don't want him charging down here for no good reason."

"But, Aunt May, you're his only sister — I have to tell him, and of course he'll want to do something for you."

"The only thing he can do for me now is to leave me alone," May said.

Unhappily, Ellen thought that her aunt was right — still, she could not leave her to die without trying to save her. Her father had to know. In order to be able to speak freely, she walked past the kitchen telephone and went back to her aunt's bedroom, where she was sure there would be an extension.

There was, and she dialed her parents' home number. The ringing at the other end of the line went on and on, until she gave up and called her father's office. As she had already half suspected, the secretary told her that her father was on one of his fishing trips — absolutely unreachable for another day or two. But she would leave word for him to call as soon as he got in.

So it had to wait. Ellen walked back toward the kitchen, her crepe-soled shoes making almost no sound on the floor.

She heard her aunt's voice saying: "You didn't come to me last night. I waited and waited. Why didn't you come?"

Almost without thinking, Ellen stopped out of sight of the doorway and went on listening.

"You said you would stay with me," May continued. Her voice had a whine in it that made Ellen uncomfortable. "You promised you would stay and look after me until the time comes."

"The girl was in the house," Peter said. "I didn't know if I should."

"What does she matter? She doesn't matter," May said sharply. "Not while I'm here, she doesn't. This is still my house and I ... I belong to you, don't I? Don't I, dearest?"

Then there was a silence. As quietly as she could, Ellen hurried away and left the house.

The sea air, damp and warm though it was, was a relief after the moldering closeness of the house. But Ellen, taking in deep breaths, still felt sick.

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They were lovers, her dying aunt and that awful young man.

That muscular, hard-eyed, insolent stranger was sleeping with her frail, elderly aunt. The idea shocked and revolted her, but she had no doubt of it — the brief conversation, her aunt's voice, could not have been more plain.

Ellen ran down the sandy, weedy incline towards the narrow beach, wanting to lose her knowledge. She didn't know how she could face her aunt, how she could stay in a house where —

She heard Danny's voice, tired, contemptuous, yet still caring: "You're so naive about sex, Ellen. You think everything's black or white. You're such a child."

Ellen started to cry, thinking of Danny, wishing she had not run away from him. What would he say to her about this? That her aunt had a right to pleasure, too, and age was just another prejudice.

But what about *him?* Ellen wondered. What about Peter — what did he get out of it? He was using her aunt in some way, she was certain of it. Perhaps he was stealing from her — she thought of all the empty rooms upstairs and wondered.

She found a piece of Kleenex in a pocket of her jeans and wiped away the tears. So much more was explained by this, she thought. Now she knew why her aunt was so desperate not to leave this rotting hulk of a house, why she didn't want her brother to come.

"Hello, Ellen Morrow."

She raised her head, startled, and found him standing directly in her path, smiling his hard smile. She briefly met, then glanced away from his dark, ungiving eyes.

"You're not very friendly," he said. "You left us so quickly. I didn't get a chance to talk to you."

She glared at him and tried to walk about him, but he fell into step with her. "You shouldn't be so unfriendly," he said. "You should try to get to know me."

She stopped walking and faced him. "Why? I don't know who you are, or what you're doing in my aunt's house."

"I think you have some idea," he said. His cool assumption nearly took her breath away. "I look after your aunt. She was all alone here before I came, with no family or friends. She was completely unprotected. *You* may find it shocking, but she's grateful to me now. She wouldn't approve of your trying to send me away."

"I'm here now," Ellen said. "I'm a part of her family. And her brother will come here, too. She won't be left alone — at the mercy of some stranger."

"She doesn't want me to leave — not for your family or for anyone."

Ellen was silent for a moment. Then she said, "She's a sick, lonely old woman — she needs someone. But what do you get out of it? Do you think she's going to leave you her

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money when she dies?"

He smiled contemptuously. "Your aunt doesn't have any money. All she has is that wreck of a house — which she plans to leave to you. I give her what she needs, and she gives me what I need — which is something a lot more basic and important than money."

Afraid that she was blushing, not wanting him to see, Ellen turned and began striding across the sand, back towards the house. She could feel him keeping pace with her at her side, but she did not acknowledge his presence.

Until he grabbed her arm — and she let out a gasp that embarrassed her as soon as she heard it. But Peter made no sign that he had noticed. Now that he had halted her, he was directing her attention to something on the ground.

Feeling foolish, still a little frightened, she let him draw her down into a crouching position beside him. It was a battle that had drawn his attention — a fight for survival in a small sandy arena. A spider, pale as the sand, danced warily on pipe-cleaner legs. Circling it, chitinous body gleaming darkly in the sunlight, was a deadly black dart of a wasp.

There was something eerily fascinating in the way the tiny antagonists circled each other, feinting, freezing, drawing back and darting forward. The spider on its delicate legs seemed nervous to Ellen, while the wasp was steady and single-minded. Although she liked neither spiders nor wasps, Ellen hoped that the spider would win.

Suddenly the wasp shot forward; the spider rolled over, legs clenching and kicking like fingers from a fist, and the two seemed to wrestle for a moment.

"Ah, now she's got him," murmured Ellen's companion. Ellen saw that his face was intent, and he was absorbed by the deadly battle.

Glancing down again, she saw that the spider was lying perfectly still, while the wasp circled it warily.

"He killed him," Ellen said.

"Not he, she," Peter corrected her. "And the spider isn't dead. Just paralyzed. The wasp is making sure that her sting has him completely under control before going on. She'll dig a hole and pull the spider into it, then lay her egg on his body. The spider won't be able to do a thing but lie in the home of his enemy and wait for the egg to hatch and start eating him." He smiled his unpleasant smile.

Ellen stood up.

"Of course, he can't feel a thing," Peter continued. "He's alive, but only in the most superficial sense. That paralyzing poison the wasp filled him with has effectively deadened him. A more advanced creature might torment himself with fears about the future, the inevitability of his approaching death — but this is just a spider. And what does a spider know?"

Ellen walked away, saying nothing. She expected him to follow her, but when she looked back she saw that he was still on his hands and knees,

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watching the wasp at her deadly work.

Once inside the house, Ellen locked the front door behind her, then went around locking the other doors and checking the windows. Although she knew it was likely that her aunt had given Peter a key to the house, she didn't want to be surprised by him again. She was locking the side door, close by her aunt's room, when the feeble voice called, "Is that you, dear?"

"It's me, Aunt May," Ellen said, wondering who that "dear" was meant for. Pity warred briefly with disgust, and then she entered the bedroom.

From the bed, her aunt gave a weak smile. "I tire so easily now," she said. "I think I may just spend the rest of the day in bed. What else is there for me to do, except wait?"

"Aunt May, I could rent a car and take you to a doctor — or maybe we could find a doctor who'd be willing to come out here."

May turned her grey head back and forth on the pillow. "No. No. There's nothing a doctor can do, no medicine in the world that can help me now."

"Something to make you feel better...."

"My dear, I feel very little. No pain at all. Don't worry about me. Please."

She looks so exhausted, Ellen thought. Almost all used up. And looking down at the small figure surrounded by bedclothes, Ellen felt her eyes fill with tears. Suddenly, she flung herself down beside the bed. "Aunt May, I don't *want* you to die!"

"Now, now," the old woman said softly, making no other movement. "Now, don't you fret. I felt the same way myself, once, but I've gotten over that. I've accepted what has happened, and so must you. So must you."

"No," Ellen whispered, her face pressed against the bed. She wanted to hold her aunt, but she didn't dare — the old woman's stillness seemed to forbid it. Ellen wished her aunt would put out her hand or turn her face to be kissed: she could not make the first move herself.

At last Ellen stopped crying and raised her head. She saw that her aunt had closed her eyes and was breathing slowly and peacefully, obviously asleep. Ellen stood up and backed out of the room. She longed for her father, for someone to share this sorrow with her.

She spent the rest of the day reading and wandering aimlessly through the house, thinking now of Danny and then of her aunt and the unpleasant stranger called Peter, feeling frustrated because she could do nothing. The wind began to blow again, and the old house creaked, setting her nerves on edge. Feeling trapped in the moldering carcass of the house, Ellen walked out onto the front porch. There she leaned against the railing and stared out at the grey and white ocean. Out here she enjoyed the bite of the wind, and the creaking of the balcony above her head did not bother her.

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Idly, her attention turned to the wooden railing beneath her hands, and she picked at a projecting splinter with one of her fingernails. To her surprise, more than just a splinter came away beneath her fingers: some square inches of the badly painted wood fell away, revealing an interior as soft and full of holes as a sponge. The wood seemed to be trembling, and after a moment of blankness, Ellen suddenly realized that the wood was infested with termites. With a small cry of disgust, Ellen backed away, staring at the interior world she had uncovered. Then she went back into the house, locking the door behind her.

It grew dark, and Ellen began to think longingly of food and companionship. She realized she had heard nothing from her aunt's room since she had left her sleeping there that morning. After checking the kitchen to see what sort of dinner could be made, Ellen went back to wake up her aunt.

The room was dark and much too quiet. An apprehension stopped Ellen in the doorway where, listening, straining her ears for some sound, she suddenly realized the meaning of the silence: May was not breathing.

Ellen turned on the light and hurried to her aunt's bed. "Aunt May. Aunt May," she said, already hopeless. She grabbed hold of one cool hand, hoping for a pulse, and laid her head against her aunt's chest, holding her own breath to listen for the heart.

There was nothing. May was dead.

Ellen drew back, crouching on her knees beside the bed, her aunt's hand still held within her own. She stared at the empty face — the eyes were closed, but the mouth hung slightly open — and felt the sorrow building slowly inside her.

At first she took it for a drop of blood. Dark and shining, it appeared on May's lower lip and slipped slowly out of the corner of her mouth. Ellen stared, stupefied, as the droplet detatched itself from May's lip and moved, without leaving a trace behind, down her chin.

Then Ellen saw what it was.

It was a small, shiny black bug, no larger than the nail on her little finger. And, as Ellen watched, a second tiny insect crawled slowly out onto the shelf of May's dead lip.

Ellen scrambled away from the bed, backwards, on her hands and knees. Her skin was crawling, her stomach churning, and there seemed to be a horrible smell in her nostrils. Somehow, she managed to get to her feet and out of the room without either vomiting or fainting.

In the hallway she leaned against the wall and tried to gather her thoughts.

May was dead.

Into her mind came the vision of a stream of black insects bubbling out of the dead woman's mouth.

Ellen moaned, and clamped her teeth together, and tried to think of something else. *It hadn't happened.*

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She wouldn't think about it.

But May was dead, and that had to be dealt with. Ellen's eyes filled with tears — then, suddenly impatient, she blinked them away. No time for that. Tears wouldn't do any good. She had to think. Should she call a funeral home? No, a doctor first, surely, even if she was truly past saving. A doctor would tell her what had to be done, who had to be notified.

She went into the kitchen and turned on the light, noticing as she did so how the darkness outside seemed to drop like a curtain against the window. In the cabinet near the phone she found the thin local phone book and looked up the listing for physicians. There were only a few of them. Ellen chose the first number and — hoping that a town this size had an answering service for its doctors — lifted the receiver.

There was no dial tone. Puzzled, she pressed the button and released it. Still nothing. Yet she didn't think the line was dead, because it wasn't completely silent. She could hear what might have been a gentle breathing on the other end of the line, as if someone somewhere else in the house had picked up the phone and was listening to her.

Jarred by the thought, Ellen slammed the receiver back into the cradle. There could be no one else in the house. But one of the other phones might be off the hook. She tried to remember if there were another phone upstairs, because she shrank at the thought of returning to her aunt's room without a doctor, someone in charge, to go with her.

But even if there were another phone upstairs, Ellen realized, she had not seen it or used it, and it was not likely to be causing the trouble. But the phone in her aunt's room could have been left off the hook by either her aunt or herself. She would have to go and check.

He was waiting for her in the hall.

The breath backed up in her throat to choke her, and she couldn't make a sound. She stepped back.

He stepped forward, closing the space between them.

Ellen managed to find her voice and, conquering for the moment her nearly instinctive fear of this man, said, "Peter, you must go get a doctor for my aunt."

"Your aunt has said she doesn't want a doctor," he said. His voice came almost as a relief after the ominous silence.

"It's not a matter of what my aunt wants anymore," Ellen said. "She's dead."

The silence buzzed around them. In the darkness of the hall Ellen could not be sure, but she thought that he smiled.

"Will you go and get a doctor?"

"No," he said.

Ellen backed away, and again he followed her.

"Why don't you go and look at her," Ellen suggested.

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"If she's dead," he said, "she doesn't need a doctor. And the morning will be soon enough to have her body disposed of."

Ellen kept backing away, afraid to turn her back on him. Once in the kitchen, she could try the phone again.

But he didn't let her. Before she could reach for the receiver, his hand shot out, and he wrenched the cord out of the wall. He had a peculiar smile on his face. Then he lifted the telephone, long cord dangling, into the air above his own head, and as Ellen pulled nervously away, he threw the whole thing, with great force, at the floor. It crashed jarringly against the linoleum, inches from Ellen's feet.

Ellen stared at him in horror, unable to move or speak, trying frantically to think how to escape him. She thought of the darkness outside, and of the long, unpaved road with no one near, and the deserted beach. Then she thought of her aunt's room, which had a heavy wooden door and a telephone which might still work.

He watched her all this time, making no move. Ellen had the odd idea that he was trying to hypnotize her, to keep her from running, or perhaps he was simply waiting for her to make the first move, watching for the telltale tension in her muscles that would signal her intentions.

Finally, Ellen knew she had to do something — she could not keep waiting for him to act forever. Because he was so close to her, she didn't dare try to run past him. Instead, she feinted to the left, as if she would run around him and towards the front door, but instead she ran to the right.

He caught her in his powerful arms before she had taken three steps. She screamed, and his mouth came down on hers, swallowing the scream.

The feel of his mouth on hers terrified her more than anything else. Somehow, she had not thought of that — for all her fear of him, it had not occurred to her until now that he meant to rape her.

She struggled frantically, feeling his arms crush her more tightly, pinning her arms to her sides and pressing the breath out of her. She tried to kick him or to bring a knee up into his crotch, but she could not raise her leg far enough, and her kicks were feeble little blows against his legs.

He pulled his mouth away from hers and dragged her back into the darkness of the hall and pressed her to the floor, immobilizing her with the weight of his body. Ellen was grateful for her jeans, which were tight-fitting. To get them off — but she wouldn't let him take them off. As soon as he released her, even for a moment, she would go for his eyes, she decided.

This thought was firmly in her mind as he rose off her, but he held her wrists in a crushing grip. She began to kick as soon as her legs were free of his weight, but her legs thrashed about his legs, her kicks doing no harm.

Abruptly, he dropped her hands.

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Abruptly, he dropped her hands. She had scarcely become aware of it and hadn't had time to do more than think of going for his eyes, when he, in one smooth, deceptively casual motion, punched her hard in the stomach.

She couldn't breath. Quite involuntarily, she half doubled over, knowing nothing but the agonizing pain. He, meanwhile, skinned her jeans and underpants down to her knees, flipped her unresisting body over as if it were some piece of furniture, and set her down on her knees.

While she trembled, dry-retched and tried to draw a full breath of air, she was aware of his fumbling at her genitals as scarcely more than a minor distraction. Shortly thereafter she felt a new pain, dry and tearing, as he penetrated her.

It was the thing she felt. One moment of pain and helplessness, and then the numbness began. She felt — or rather, she ceased to feel — a numbing tide, like intense cold, flowing from her groin into her stomach and hips and down into her legs. Her ribs were numbed, and the blow he had given her no longer pained her. There was nothing — no pain, no messages of any kind from her abused body. She could still feel her lips, and she could open and close her eyes, but from below the chin she might as well have been dead.

And besides the loss of feeling, there was loss of control. All at once she fell like a rag doll to the floor, cracking her chin painfully.

She suspected she was still being raped, but she could not even raise her head and turn to see.

Above her own labored breathing, Ellen became aware of another sound. a low, buzzing hum. From time to time her body rocked and flopped gently, presumably in response to whatever he was still doing to it.

Ellen closed her eyes and prayed to wake. Behind her shut lids, vivid images appeared. Again she saw the insect on her aunt's dead lip, a bug as black, hard and shiny as Peter's eyes. The wasp in the sand dune, circling the paralyzed spider. Aunt May's corpse covered with a glistening tide of insects, crawling over her, feasting on

And when they had finished with her aunt, would they come and find her here on the floor, paralyzed and ready for them?

She cried out at the thought, and her eyes flew open. She saw Peter's feet in front of her. So he had finished. She began to cry.

"Don't leave me like this," she mumbled, her mind still swarming with fears.

She heard his dry chuckle. "Leave? But this is my home."

And then she understood. Of course he would not leave. He would stay here with her as he had stayed with her aunt, looking after her as she grew weaker, until finally she died and spilled out the living cargo he had planted in her.

"You won't feel a thing," he said.

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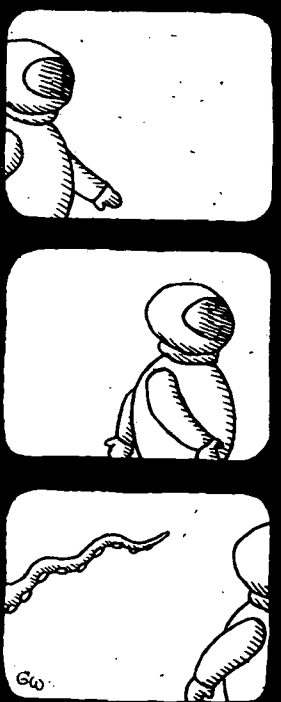
Films

BAIRD SEARLES



TOO LATE AND LATHE TWO

For perhaps the first time in the history of this column, I actually have a backlog of matters to discuss. Last month I frittered away a column on *The Black Hole;* this month will have to be divided between two things of much greater interest, one, admittedly, a second look.

First, however, a first look at *Star Trek: The Motion Picture.* Fortunately, I've never had to cope with *Star Trek,* the TV series, here; I say fortunately because at this point the ramifications of *Star Trek,* the phenomenon, are beyond any sensible analysis. In brief, *re* the show itself, I thought the first two seasons were excellent science fiction, particularly for the time (how many years ago now?) and place (the tube).

But the adolescent mania surrounding the show grew to a point where any serious adult was inevitably turned off; this perhaps unfortunate attitude was also inevitably applied to the plans for a movie version.

Even ignoring that aspect and trying for an objective viewpoint, the film seemed too late, too much an answer to the adolescent hysteria and not enough of a sensible project with its own integrity.

As the search for a script and various production problems dragged on and on, one's faint hope became fainter, and when *ST the MP* opened neck

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and neck with *The Black Hole*, I opted for reviewing the latter first, simply to put off the agony I expected from the former.

Well, I guess I'd just better own up — it is I, therefore, who am too late, not *Star Trek: the Motion Picture*. It is, for the most part, a grand experience, and I am tardy in reporting on it.

Having now lost the respect of the entire intellectual s/f community (as I seem to have already those I have spoken directly to about it), let me slightly justify my stand without being *too* defensive about it.

OK, it's no *Lathe of Heaven*. The plot (which I'm sure I don't have to go into at this late date) is not exactly cerebrally demanding. It is, in fact, a bit feeble-minded by today's written-s/f standards. But *not*, I must insist, by today's filmed-s/f standards. It was certainly a cut above *Star Wars;* let's simply say it didn't insult my intelligence, as did *The Black Hole*.

But it does have that something that *Lathe* lacked, and that something is very important to film. It is visually absolutely splendid. The sets/effects (I defy anyone to rationally say where one leaves off and the other begins these days) are big, eye-filling, convincing and very beautiful.

They evoked (and sometimes outdid) the visions of my mind's eye created by all the science fiction I've *read* over the years (as did *2001* and *Star Wars)*. The translation of Decker was A. Merritt's Shining One of *The Moon Pool* in action, and Vulcan was every hell-hole planet I'd ever sweated through. The wonderfully leisurely tour of the *Enterprise* was as hypnotically pleasurable as the unedited nine minutes of laps around the inside of the *Discovery*, and its immensity all the more shocking when reduced to minuteness inside Vejur.

These admirable production values go a long way in making up for several not-so-admirable aspects of *ST the MP*. It is too long, for one thing. Much of the dialogue is excruciating, for another, and the acting leaves a lot to be desired, probably because it's on the level of acceptably mediocre TV acting, which is well below what we're used to on the big screen.

But all in all, Mr. Roddenberry and Co., you've done A Good Thing, and I'm sorry I was late.

Having seen *The Lathe of Heaven* at a pre-broadcast screening, I was most interested in reactions to the broadcast itself, my own and others'.

My own was more or less the same — it was an admirably intelligent effort, marred by a lapse into incoherence and/or metaphysics (the same thing, really, to my perhaps too-straight-forward mind) toward the end. The question is — if the problem were intrinsic to the novel, is it the filmmakers' fault that viewers had to go back to the novel to find out what happened? Or the novel's fault for not making a perfectly filmmable script?

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The logical extension of that is to have not filmed it at all, which I can't accept because I liked so much of what I saw.

I have occasion to work in a spot where I meet literally thousands of science fiction readers (note — I specify readers, not Fans). A surprising number had seen *The Lathe of Heaven*, and the reaction of most of those was very positive, though there was a high percentage of the I-got-a-little-lost-toward-the-end. There was definitely a feeling of "This should demonstrate that there's more to science fiction than 'that Buck Rogers stuff.'"

A great many non-s/f types also saw it; again, the reactions were for the most part positive. One standout exception was John J. O'Connor, the TV critic for The New York Times. After giving *Lathe* an equivocal notice, he went on to question (and I paraphrase) why PBS was messing around with science fiction when it was a genre that was not exactly ignored elsewhere. In other words, why do something interestingly and differently? Why produce *Lathe* when we already have *Buck Rogers* and *Battlestar Galactica?* In another area, why should PBS show *I, Claudius* when we can see *Quo Vadis* and *Ben Hur* on the tube? Now there is a classically narrow mind.

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What if the U.S. and the Soviets simultaneously latched on to a new, unlimited source of energy? And what if the "current administration" — Jimmy and Ham and Jody and Cy — cooked up the ultimate deal with the devil? The connection will soon be made clear to you . . . .

Hell's Fire

BY
MACK REYNOLDS
and GARY JENNINGS

AFTER THE END

Courtesy of the Recording Demon, in Hell II on the planet Mercury, a few facts pertinent to the end:

In 1980, the mightiest weapons in the arsenals of the United States of America and the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics were, respectively, the MX and the SS-18 intercontinental ballistic missiles. By the terms of SALT II, each of the two nations was allowed only 308 of those heaviest ICBMs, but that was really rather more than enough. Either an American MX or a Soviet SS-18 could carry as many as ten nuclear warheads — they averaged eight apiece — independently aimed to fall upon various targets. In other words, the U.S. and the U.S.S.R. had the combined capability to drop a separate H-bomb on each of 4,928 cities and towns — no matter that there were only 4,643 communities on Earth big enough to be called cities or towns. And each of those H-bomb warheads packed a 1000-kiloton punch, or nearly fifty times the destructive power of the primitive A-bomb which devastated Hiroshima. In other words, each of the 4,928 warheads was powerful enough to obliterate all life in a city the size of Shanghai, Mexico City and Tokyo *combined* — no matter that no city of that immensity existed on Earth. Suffice it to say that the two arsenals of ICBMs (not to mention stockpiles of lesser weapons) were capable of making the whole planet a lifeless black cinder.

And yet the inhabitants of that fragile Earth complained. As if ignorant of those all-too-lightly-leashed behemoths throbbing with pent-up energy, the mortals complained. Right up until the end, they complained of an "energy shortage."

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THE BEGINNING

"Ham," the Secretary of Energy said urgently, "I've got to see Jimmy soonest."

The White House Chief of Staff looked up from his album of gossip-column clippings, and said, "He's having his morning meditation, Charlie, *contemplating his navel.*"

"Which one? He's born-again."

"Very funny. I tell you, Charlie, I worry that he'll meditate himself right into catatonia one of these times. The pressures are getting to him. Inflation, Kennedy, unemployment, Kennedy, the energy crisis, Kennedy, kamikaze rabbits...."

"Well, you can scratch the energy crisis, at least," said the Secretary of Energy, smiling and dry-washing his hands. "I've finally come up with the answer to that one."

"Holy smog!" blurted Ham. "Let's go!" And he led the way to the Oval Office.

Jimmy lifted woeful eyes from his Bible and the latest Gallup Poll report. "Morning, Charlie," he said dismally. "You look as pert as some ole boy that's finally got to the head of the gasoline line. What's all the enthusiasm?"

"There won't *be* any more gasoline lines, Jimmy. You may not believe this, but I think I've solved the energy problem, once and for all time. We'll have energy to burn."

"I don't believe it."

"I know, it sounds unbelievable. It'll sound cockamamie even when I explain. But it's true. Oh, a few little details to work out, sure. But it's been right under our noses all the time. Under our feet, maybe I should say."

"Charlie, we're already trying everything under our noses and under God's blue sky. Solar power, tidal power, nucler power, flower power, oil from shale, oil from coal, gasohol, wind power, geothermal power, cordwood..."

"Yes, yes," the Secretary said impatiently. "All sorts of *new* ideas. But I propose to exploit the *oldest* source of energy available, and the most dependable. Come on, fellows, *think!* What's right under our feet?" He sort of danced a little bit.

Jimmy leaned to peer over the big dish of salted peanuts on his desk. "The rug? The floor?" The Secretary made beckoning charade gestures. "The downstairs? The White House tourists?" Beckon, beckon. "The basement? Nixon's old tapes?" Feverish beckoning. "Now cut it out, Charlie. In ten minutes, I've got an appointment with the White House barber. I need another new image. I'm fixing to have my hair parted from side to side..."

Panting slightly, the Secretary of Energy said, "All right, I'll tell it from the beginning. How it came to me. I was sitting in my office, gazing out across the Potomac, over toward the Pentagon, where I used to work. But now I was regarding the Pentagon

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from the *outside*. For the first time, you might say. And I thought about its shape, and what that shape signifies. And it came to me — in a flash of inspiration."

He tried to look like a man inspired. The other two just looked. He pounded Jimmy's desk — it made the peanuts leap in their dish — and shouted:

"Hell's fire!"

"Now, Charlie, you know I don't cotton to profanity."

"No, no, I mean literally. Hell's fire! We tap Hell's fire."

"Charlie, you're as cracked as them goobers in that dish."

The Secretary said softly, "Do you mean to sit there and tell me you don't *believe* in Hell? In the everlasting fires a-burning?"

"Well, sure I believe. I'm a born-again Fundamentalist."

"Okay. Those fires have been burning ever since the Fall from Grace, right? They'll go on burning throughout eternity, right? And they're not inaccessible like the fires of the Sun — they're right under our feet, right? A source of energy that's never been tapped. Energy that's mighty and limitless. Energy that will never peter out."

"Hot damn," murmured Ham.

"Here's what we'll do," the Secretary said. "If we use that heat like the world's biggest nuclear reactor, and make steam that turns the world's biggest generators, we've got untold megawatts of electricity. Forever! For heating, lighting, air-conditioning, powering factories. The rest is a mere matter of technology. Convert our cars and planes and ships to electric power. We'll have so much energy at our command that we can tight-beam it by microwave — up and down every street and highway, to the planes in the sky, to satellites and space probes ... even to Moon and Mars colonies ... and..." He ran out of breath.

Jimmy seemed dazed. "I've got to admit, it sounds like a better idea than redoing my hair. But Charlie — *how?*"

"Yes, how?" echoed Ham. "And come to think of it, what's the connection with you gazing across the Potomac toward the Pentagon?"

Charlie said simply, "How do you raise the Devil?"

Jimmy said, "When I was a young blade in Plains, we used to get a little ole gal and maybe a Mason jar of mule and —"

"No, no, I mean literally."

They stared at him until he sighed in exasperation.

"Look. We can't just tap into Hell without permission. We've got to make a deal with Whatchmacallim — Old Nick, the Prince of Darkness, Old Scratch, His Satanic Majesty, whatever. Meaning we've got to communicate with him somehow. A plummet conference, you might call it, heh heh heh..."

They went on staring. He sighed again and spelled it out:

"We don't want to go there. He's

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got to come here. We've got to raise the Devil. I'm not hip to all the mumbo-jumbo that's necessary — we'll get experts for that — but one thing I do know. You start by drawing a pentagram, a uniformly five-sided figure. And what have we got over there in Virginia? The Pentagon! The world's biggest five-sided *anything!*"

"Gee willikers, I dunno," Jimmy said uncomfortably. "What would my Sunday School class think about me raising the Devil?"

Ham cleared his throat and discreetly indicated the Gallup report, now lightly sprinkled with peanuts. "Chief, I hate to make politics an issue here. But them-there Gallup people — for the first time in the history of Presidential poll-taking — they've done come up with a negative popularity percentage. Minus fifteen percent of voting-age Americans credit you with doing a good job in office. And November's coming up fast."

"Say no more," said Jimmy, raising a hand. "For the sake of the nation, I must risk principles, reputation and my place in the vestry. Even my immortal soul."

"Good man," the Secretary of Energy said approvingly. "All right. We've got the pentagram. What else will we need?"

"Let's ask Jody," said Ham. "He's the semiliterate one around here."

The Press Secretary came in answer to the President's bellpush.

"Howdy, fellas. Y'all just sitting here moping over that-there Gallup thing?"

"No," said Jimmy. "Sit down. We want you to tell us something. How do you raise the Devil?"

"Shucks, that's easy. Toss a blanket in the back of the pickup, get a little ole gal and a little ole jug —"

"No, no," said Charlie, and explained all over again.

"Well, now," said Jody, slightly staggered. "I'd reckon y'all got your work cut out for you. In the old days, them wizards and alchemists and all, they might devote a lifetime to it — researching the right words and formulas and all — before they raised even the measliest Devil. Look at that ole Doctor Faustus, for instance. Year in, year out, Faust in war, Faust in peace, Faust going through depressions and boom times, but always working away, trying to raise a demon. And then, when he finally got one, it was that sneaky operator Mephistopheles, no more trustworthy than a Republican or a Kennedy. Y'all'll want to deal with a higher-up Devil than that."

"Yes," said Ham. "But Faust was a long time ago. The Middle Ages. They say nowadays human knowledge is doubling every eight years. There's good new scientists like von Däniken and Velikovsky. The alchemists of today ought to be light-years beyond ole Faustus."

Jody looked blank. "What alchemists of today?"

"Why, hell — that's a pun, son —

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surely they got some up at MIT. They got every other kind of ologist."

Jimmy flicked the peanuts out of his telephone's panel and pushed one of the multitude of buttons. "Call MIT. Put me through to their Department of Alchemy."

THE APPROACH

The President's Private Secretary announced the arrival of two men from MIT: "Professors of Alchemy Ozmov and Clock."

"Come right in, gentlemen," said Jimmy. "We're very informal here. Y'all just call me Jimmy and I'll call y'all Ike and Artie. Have a goober."

Humble in the presence of greatness, the professors took a few peanuts apiece and then took the chairs proffered by Jody.

The Secretary of Energy said, "Well, gentlemen, have you given our problem any thought since it was outlined to you?"

"Too bloody right we have," said the expatriate Englishman in the owlish eyeglasses.

"In my oilier days," said the expatriate Brooklynite, "I did a bit of science-writing, and dat meant resoich, but never on dis scale. Frankly, youse had us in toimurl at foist."

"Toimurl?" said Jimmy, puzzled.

"Brooklynese for turmoil."

Jimmy frowned petulantly, "Can't youse — I mean, can't y'all speak good Plains English?"

"In plain English," said Professor Artie, "we did come up with the incantation and the formula for the devilish brew."

"So quickly?" said the Secretary of Energy. "Why, Jody here was telling us how it took those Middle Ages alchemists years and years of trial and error to —"

"We put it to de computers," said Professor Ike, twiddling his extravagant sideburns. "Fed in all de possible poimutations and let de computers do de trial and error. Like dat old story about de ten billion names of God. So we can tell youse de woids to chant — *if* youse can get de ingredients of de magic potion. Like, youse'll need a scrap of mouldy bandage from a royal mummy."

"No sweat," said Ham. "I've always wanted to see the pyramids."

"But some of the other ingredients may be demmed difficult," said Artie. "I mean to say — a pinch of dust from a vampire's coffin? I'd wager two thousand to one against—"

"No sweat," said Ham again, between his teeth. "I know a New York discotheque where there's no shortage of them bloodsuckers. Or any kind of dust," he added.

"Okay," said Ike, consulting a piece of paper. "Den dere's phlegm and bile."

Jimmy said casually, "The Senate."

"Jolly good," said Artie. "But what about the carrion vomit of scavenger buzzards?"

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"The FBI."

"Last of all," said Ike ominously. "T'ree drops of blood from a voigin maiden."

Silence.

After they had all sat, baffled, for a time, Artie tentatively suggested, "That's Virginia across the river, isn't it? It sounds a likely place."

"Ha!" said Ham.

"No, Artie may have a point," said the Secretary of Energy. "We're only acquainted with the Washington suburbs. Out beyond them, up in the Blue Ridge, the hillbillies are still abysmally backward. There may be one Virginia virgin so homely that her own father or brother hasn't yet—"

"Sounds like a job for Billy," said Jimmy, turning to his telephone panel. "There's nothing too homely to discourage that ole boy."

While the call was going through to Plains, Jody said to the Professor of Alchemy, "Assuming we get all the necessary ingredients, what next? Just how do you raise the Devil?"

Artie grinned reminiscently and said, "Well, before I moved to Sri Lanka and became a born-again Buddhist — back when I was a lad in Somerset — I'd take a lissome lass and a bottle of the best, and we'd ramble up into the heather on Exmoor..."

"No, no," Ike interrupted gleefully. "Down behind de gaswoiks..."

"Seriously, fellows," Jody prompted.

Straightfaced again, Ike said, "Stand inside a pentagram. De bigger, de better. Mix de ingredients togedder." He handed over the list. "Den chant dis incantation." He handed over another paper. "Den just wait for de firewoiks."

THE PLUMMET CONFERENCE

Jimmy had finally taken Cy into his confidence, and took only Cy with him to the hoped-for meeting. After all, they would be dealing with the plenipotentiary of a foreign power — very foreign — and that was rightfully the job of the Secretary of State. The two of them stood in the exact center of the five-sided parade ground, surrounded by the five-sided 34 acres of the Pentagon edifice, the world's biggest-ever pentagram. The two stood alone — very alone — for all personnel had been, by Presidential order, evacuated from the building for the occasion. At this stage, Jimmy was a bit leery about witnesses.

"Don't drop that-there vial, Cy," he cautioned. "It's the relic of the last and only virgin in Virginia — maybe in all Creation. It might be absolutely irreplaceable."

They unfolded the card table they had brought, and emptied onto it the contents of the several Baggies they carried. Cy carefully uncorked the vial and dribbled its precious fluid onto the mummy bandage, the coffin dust, the phlegm and bile and other substances. He plucked an Elaine's swizzle stick

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from his breast pocket and began gingerly to stir the malodorous mess.

"I think I'm getting nauseous," said Jimmy.

"So do your constituents," muttered Cy, "according to that latest Gallup —"

"Asmodeous!" Jimmy shouted, reading from the paper. "Eazaz! Bephthali! Auld Clootie! Ouroboros! Cthulhu! Shazam!..."

And so on, to the end of it. Then they waited for the fireworks. Nothing at all happened. Cy looked around the parade ground, as if expecting a divot of the Astroturf to lift like a manhole cover. After a long wait, Jimmy said, "Something went wrong."

Cy said, "I'll bet Billy's hillbilly broad wasn't really —"

"He swore she was when he took the blood sample. But ten minutes later, if I know Billy..." He sighed and shrugged. "Let's get back to Washington and round up them alchemists again. They must have left out some crucial detail."

Inside the great building, they headed for an elevator bank, to get to the basement garage where their limousine was parked. But just as Cy stretched a finger toward the call button, he noticed the flickering numbers above the door. The elevator was occupied and rising from a sub-sub-basement.

Jimmy said testily, "I ordered that not a living soul was to be in the entire complex."

"Presidential orders aren't what they used to be," Cy admitted. "Especially since that latest Gallup —"

"This damn elevator," Jimmy interrupted, "is taking a devilishly long *time coming up*."

The words inspired the same thought in both their minds. Cy looked at Jimmy. Jimmy looked at Cy — as best he could, though his new nose-length bangs of hair.

"You think —?"

"What else?"

The doors opened and he stepped from the elevator, the very model of a modern Major General, his uniform impeccable, his shoulder stars gleaming, his chest a refulgent fruit salad, among which ribbons could be glimpsed even the Good Conduct. His face might have been a *trifle* more bibulously maroon than is common among general officers. But he came to a smart salute and crisply introduced himself:

"Major General Lucifuge, commanding the demonic legions of the Western Hemisphere. Reporting as ordered, Mr. President."

"Call me Jimmy. But that's a *U.S. Army* uniform!"

"Protective mimicry, Mr. Jimmy. One naturally tries to be inconspicuous, whatever the locale, whatever the era. You should have seen some of the get-ups required elsewhere and in earlier times. Brussels in the Middle Ages, for example. Imagine wearing a great bulging codpiece to be inconspicuous!"

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Jimmy, himself a former naval person, sputtered, "But how *dare* you wear the sacrosanct Congressional Medal of Honor?"

"Quite legitimately, sir," the demon said stiffly. "It was awarded me after the victory at My Lai."

Cy tactfully intervened, "Gentlemen, gentlemen. I suggest we proceed to the conference at the White House."

The conferees were a select group: Jimmy, Charlie, Cy, Ham, Jody and the flamboyantly inconspicuous General Lucifuge. He listened intently, and nodded from time to time, as the Secretary of State and the Secretary of Energy explained their readiness to deal for a power supply from Hell's fire. Finally he said:

"Most intriguing, gentlemen, and eminently feasible, I should think. Naturally there will be protocols to settle: the logistics of supply, the terminal connections and so forth. But indeed there are several sites in this country where only a minimum of drilling would be necessary — that is to say, where Hell's fire burns closest to the surface. Some are quite near here. The Pentagon, where we met, and Langley a few miles away. The J. Edgar Hoover Building. Then there's Las Vegas, of course, and Hollywood, and Wall Street..."

Jimmy was delighted. "Have a goober, general. You'll agree to a treaty, then?"

"Well, I am only the military chief of this hemisphere, so I must lay the proposal before higher authority. Or lower, if you will. But I can almost positively assure you that it will be received with enthusiasm. Even with admiration at the ingenuity of the notion."

Cy, ever the cautious negotiator, asked, "And the quid pro quo? America gets an unlimited and perpetual power supply. What does Hell propose as an equitable exchange?"

The general said airily, "Oh, the usual terms, I should imagine. Surely you are familiar with the usual terms."

"Yes," Jimmy said bravely. "I regret that I have but one soul to give for my country. Fetch the contract. I will prick my finger and —"

The demon coughed delicately. "Excuse me, sir, but born-again Christians are hardly at a premium these days. Besides, it is obvious that every other man, woman and child in the United States of America will partake of this new bounty, and will be equally indebted for it." He smiled broadly, revealing exceptional incisors, and rubbed his long-nailed hands together. "This will certainly rebound to my credit down below. More than two hundred and twenty million souls in one transaction, not to mention those yet unborn. We've never had an entire nation sell out before. The best until now was the acquisition of two whole cities in one package deal."

Jody was inquisitive. "What two cities?"

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"Sodom and Gomorrah."

Ham murmured, "I always *have* wondered — what kind of wickedness did they do in *Gomorrah?*"

Before the demon could enlighten him, Jimmy said, "Now, wait just a minute here. Do you mean, General Lucifuge, that we can't strike a bargain without signing over the immortal soul of every last American citizen, from here to eternity?"

The general shrugged. "This is a democracy. All benefit equally, all are equally beholden. Section eight of Article One of your Constitution specifies that the government is empowered to lay and collect taxes, duties, imposts and excises, to provide for the general welfare."

"The government does not reside in me," said Jimmy. "I am only its Chief Executive. Why, if I were unilaterally to sign a deal like this, I would be reviled from every pulpit and platform and —"

"Ahem," said the general. "Scarcely more so than at present, according to the latest Gallup Poll. But, sir, you may be unduly apprehensive. Even the Reverend Billy Graham drives a car, and he ought to welcome an end to gasoline lines. For that matter, he was a truck driver before he turned preacher. He might even influence the Teamsters' Union to priase and cheer your decision."

"Unfortunately," said Cy, and he looked genuinely unhappy about it, "the President cannot make that decision. General, you must be aware that the Constitution's section two of Article Two requires the Chief Executive to get congressional approval before he concludes any significant treaty. The Congress would certainly not approve such a touchy one as this without getting a popular mandate from its multitude of separate constituencies."

General Lucifuge shrugged again. "Very well. Put it to a referendum. Ask John Q. Public to decide. Does he want unlimited and free power during his lifetime? To drive his automobile, his power mower, his snowmobile. To heat his split-level to a temperature that allows him to watch TV in his undershirt while drinking chilled beer. To air-condition his 80-foot Winnebago camper. To operate his Betamax videotaper and the electric Cracker-Crisper in his kitchen. To power his son's guitar and its earthquake amplifiers, his wife's Exercycle, his daughter's ben-wa vibrating egg..."

"Right on!" cried Ham. "Why, it would even bring back the Detroit dinosaur! No more of them dinky Jap and Jerry jalopies!"

"America could again assume its leadership among nations," mused Cy. "Born again as the Big Brother, the ideal, the envy of the world."

Jody shouted, "*Why not the best?*"

"But of course," Jimmy pointed out, "there's the ultimate catch."

"What catch?" asked the general, jovially. "John Q. Public gets all those enviable and admirable benefits, and it

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costs him nothing. Nothing in cash outlay or hidden taxes or overtime labor, nothing he will miss. Why, the American workingman's productivity and pride in performance can slump still further. He can work a three-day week, turning out products of guaranteed instant breakdown. And then? When he dies, which he'll eventually do anyway, he relinquishes something he's not even sure he has, or has any other use for. This will be the first administration ever to offer *not* 'pie in the sky when you die,' but pie here and now! By all means, put it to a referendum. Vote Yes for Prosperity, Pleasure and Perdition. Vote No and suffer ever-worsening shortages and rationing and deprivation, ever-rising prices, ever-deteriorating quality of life, ever-decreasing military power and national prestige. Need I go on? I think, gentlemen, you may be surprised at the thundering mandate of *Yes!*"

"I dunno," Jimmy persisted. "It won't be all that easy a row to hoe. The Republicans will call it galloping socialism. And imagine Big Oil's reaction; they're even lobbying against windmills. And then the environmentalists — Nader, Greenpeace, the Sierra Club..."

"Vociferous minorities, but only minorities," said the demon. "You must sell the proposition to the mass market. And that means — if I may cite yet another locale where Hell's fire burns just under the pavement — that means calling on Madison Avenue."

THE CAMPAIGN

Naturally, every advertising agency along Ulcer Gulch vied for the juicy and prestigious assignment of convincing the Great Unwashed to vote "Yes" on Proposition Perdition. But, at General Lucifuge's suggestion, the account was awarded to the agency which, in the 1950s, had twice successfully engineered the election to the Presidency of a considerably more colorless general. Now, in the conference room at Batten, Bitten, Devour & Upchuck, the Copy Chief called his Task Force to order:

"Okay, guys and gals, the brainstorm session is underway. As you know, we've already settled on a general theme for the campaign: *See America Faust!* Now we need some irresistible slogans for billboards, bullhorns, bumper stickers. So let's just toss a few ideas off the tops of our heads. Run 'em up the minaret and see who salaams. Ready? Yell 'em out!"

"There's no fuel like an old fuel!"

"Get thee behind us, Satan!"

"Buy now, fry later!"

"Damned if you do, damned if you don't!"

"Faustus with the mostest!"

The referendum brought to the polls the highest percentage of the American electorate ever to turn out for any election in the nation's history. And, probably needless to say. Proposition Perdition was given a resounding, overwhelming, landslide "Yes!"

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Only a very few Americans, members of hardshell religious sects and the like, subsequently renounced their American citizenship and sought political asylum abroad.

THE PLOT THICKENS

The Politburo was in session in the converted throne room of the *Bolshoi Kremlevski Dvorets*, The Great Kremlin Palace. The beetle-browed General Secretary, Number One, of course presided, occupying the chair at the head of the conference table, the chair which had once been Rasputin's. While the assembly waited for their visitor to arrive, Politburocrat Number Nine, unable any longer to contain his curiosity, asked the General Secretary:

"But, Comrade Leonid, how do you raise the Devil?"

Number One's eyebrows twitched mischievously, and he said, "Well, when I was a young chelovyekh in the Ukraine, I'd find a nice plump podruga and a boutylka of vodka, and we'd slip off to some secluded corner of the collective, and —"

"No, no," said Number Nine. "I meant literally. How were we able to summon this personage? And, for that matter, why?

"Ah, I forgot, Comrade Andrei, you were occupied with the cover-up of that latest zadacha in Cuba at the time. Well, as you know, we keep KGB men — disguised as bartenders, waiters, pretty girls, etcetera — constantly hovering about the White House Chief of Staff, waiting for him to get drunk or stoned and blab some thing indiscreet. In a nightclub, a KGB busboy overheard him refer to something called Proposition Perdition, and it did not take us long to gather all the details." The General Secretary concisely retold the whole story to date.

"But, Comrade Number One," objected Number Nine. "We Soviets are born-again atheists. We do not believe in such decadent bourgeois fantasies. Hell does not exist."

"No matter," said Number One gruffly. "Whatever Amerika has got, we want. Even if it's nonexistent Hell's fire."

"Well, yes," mused Number Nine. "As Foreign Secretary, I had far rather deal with even a nonexistent Devil than with the obtrusively real Arabs."

"And you see the ramifications," the General Secretary went on. "If we sit back, smirking at this nonsense, and let the Amerikanskiyi clamp a monopoly on Hell's fire, they would have an invincible supremacy over us and every other nation on Earth. Unlimited resources for defense, for offense, for imperialist expansion. We cannot allow that. Even if it is only a grandiose delusion of their perverted national imagination, we cannot allow that."

"So we took countermeasures?"

"Instantly. It was not difficult for a KGB janitor at MIT to provide copies

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of the incantation and the singularly nasty formula. Only one of the potion's ingredients might have been considered difficult of procurement. I cannot imagine where the Amerikanskiyi found it. But we are fortunate that our Slavic women are so preponderantly ugly that most of them never even get raped except in the confusion of wartime. We were lucky, too, that our Sverdrup Island in the Kara Sea was already an almost perfect pentagram in shape; we merely had to trim it a bit more neatly, using laser beams from satellite Kosmos MCMVII. So all went satisfactorily, and the, er, ambassador should be arriving here by helicopter any —"

A regally garbed lackey flung open the chamber's massive doors and announced, "Comrade Marshal Satanachia!"

The newcomer was not exactly the model of a modern Red Army marshal. He wore the drab and démodé Party uniform formerly affected by Stalin and others of the Old Bolshevikiyi.

"Zdrav stvyuitye," he said in greeting, but held up a hand. "Do not stand, Comrades. Etiquette is only for class-conscious western lickspittles. As announced, I am Marshal Satanachia, military chief of the demonic legions of the Eastern Hemisphere. I have long admired your Five-Year Plan — for fifty years at least — and I am here now to bring it to culmination once and for all."

He took the waiting chair at the end of the table opposite Number One, who drummed his thick fingers for a moment before remarking:

"As born-again atheists, we of course do not believe in you, Tovarisch. But I remember my old babushka's stories. Her description — er — differed somewhat."

"One adopts protective mimicry," said the newcomer. "It would hardly do for me to appear these days in some such guise as Baba Yaga. As for your disbelief" — he smiled, revealing remarkable incisors — "some say that is Hell's most subtle weapon."

Number Six cleared his throat. "Not believing, mind you, but I'd like to ask an academic question. It was dust from Stalin's coffin that we used in the summoning formula. How *is* our discredited old ex-Comrade nowadays?"

"Oh, quite content. When he is not purging his particular domains of Hell, or turning Trotsky on his spit, Josef plays cards with the others."

"Others?"

"Winston and Franklin. Charles, when they let him sit in."

"Charles?"

"De Gaulle. For chips, they use the souls of their various domains of the damned. The winner gets to invent new torments for all the souls in the pot."

"It sounds diverting," said Number One. "I shall not mind at all signing over my soul in exchange for your power supply. I think you would be

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getting mine soon, in any case."

"Yes," said the marshal. "Which makes it less than a blue chip in the present deal, Comrade. Not to shilly-shally, as my chicken hearted colleague Lucifuge did in Amerika, I shall tell you bluntly. Hell's fire will cost you the soul of every citizen now living or ever to be born in the Soviet Union."

Number One grunted and shrugged. So did all the other Numbers around the table. Marshal Satanachia added:

"That condition caused considerable perturbation in Amerika. It will not here, I take it?"

"We are a socialist nation. To each according to his needs, from each according to his abilities. From each and every Soviet citizen, then, his soul."

"Very good," gloated the marshal, rubbing his long-nailed hands together. "Some two and a half hundred million souls. More than ten times as many as my detestable rival Lucifuge will be delivering. Oh, this will really win me favor down below. I may even be allowed to sit in on the card games."

Number One's thick eyebrows lifted incredulously. "You mean you rank below the late and unlamented Josef Stalin? Now look here! The U.S.S.R. is entitled to treat with *your* Number One himself!"

"If you like," said the demon, indifferently. "But it would mean delay. Our Number One is not on Earth at this time."

"Of course not," said the General Secretary, momentarily forgetting that he did not believe in such things. "He is *under* the Earth."

"No, actually he is touring — I suppose you'd say *above* it right now."

"In Heaven?" exclamed a number of the Numbers simultaneously.

"Not likely," laughed the emissary. "I shall explain. You perhaps have heard of a plan which the imperialist West calls the Lagrange Five Project."

"Yes," said Number Twelve, a member of the Soviet Academy of Sciences. "A bourgeois plot to build a 'space colony,' as they call it, designed to house ten thousand persons. A program far more ambitious than our plans for mere space platforms."

Marshal Satanachia sighed. "When that damnable English science fiction hack first proposed it, we in Hell thought it ludicrous. But we put it to our computers, and we have some devilishly advanced computers. They say Lagrange Five is not at all ludicrous, but both practical and desirable — and will be urgently necessary before long. In a century or two — no time at all, by hellish standards — there will be more mortals living in space than on Earth."

"So?" said Number Twelve.

The marshal addressed him directly, "Where will Hell be situated, Comrade Nikolai, when most of the human race is living on artificial space islands?"

The whole Politburo blinked.

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He explained, as to children, "Ever since the Fall, our dominions have been *down there*. But where is 'down' in space? I might also remark, Comrades, that outer space is *cold*!"

They blinked again.

"That is why our Number one is unavailable for consultation. He is out, uh, casing the Solar System. At present he is checking-out the possibilities of the sizzling planet Mercury. In the meantime, Comrades, I assure you I have the authority to lay your proposal before the other exalted Comrades of Hell's, uh, Politburo."

"A toast to that!" boomed Number One, heaving himself to his feet like a bear about to perform. He clapped his paws and immediately the chamber doors flew open to admit resplendently liveried lackeys propelling carts laden with zakusa: black, red and golden caviar, cold sturgeon in aspic, cheeses, pickles, paté, cold cuts, bottles of vodka peeking from their imprisoning blocks of ice.

"And my poor rival Lucifuge was treated to peanuts!" laughed Marshal Satanachia. He hoisted his glass and shouted, "Na zdroviye, Comrades!" Then they all sang the *Internationale*, though only the emissary from Hell could remember all the words.

THE CLIMAX

The confrontation took place, per tradition, in Geneva. The conferees faced each other coldly, angrily, across the heavy oaken table. On one side sat Jimmy, Cy, Ham, Jody, the Secretary of Energy, and Major General Lucifuge. On the other sat Numbers One through Thirteen, and Marshal Satanachia. At the head of the table, as referee, sat the UN Secretary General, a light tan Black of the Third World. The air crackled with high tension.

"The situation is this," said Cy. "The United States insists on maintaining her monoply on Hell's fire, so that her export products can undersell every other country's, thus solving the problem of her trade imbalance, rescuing the dollar and controlling national inflation."

"Nyet, the situation is *this*," said Number Five. "The Soviet Union demands her fair share of Hell's fire, so she can raise the standard of Soviet living to such an enviable point that all other peoples will recognize the worth of Communism, thus bringing about the World Revolution of all the Earth's proletariat."

"The true situation," said the UN Secretary General acidly, "is that you are both dissembling your real motives. You each want Hell's fire only to affirm your supremacy as the foremost superpower. If either of you get it, or both of you, God help the rest of the world."

Ignoring him, the U.S. Secretary of State growled at the U.S.S.R.'s Number Five, "The idea was ours. You Russkies are infringing a common-law copyright."

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Number Three or Four said blandly, "We can produce historical evidence to prove that the idea was originally proposed by a Byelorussian muzhik, one P. Tidmov, in the year 1812."

Jody shot back, "We were first to implement the idea. That gives us tacit claim to all rights. Y'all are claim-jumpers!"

Number Nine said, "You are once again trying to interfere in the internal affairs of an autonomous nation. We are drilling on our own territory, as I am sure your spy satellites have verified. Under Lubyanka prison, along the Gulag archipelago..."

Jimmy slammed the table with his fist. "You godless atheists are tapping *our* Christian hell's fire, for which we contracted at a price that still haunts my dreams."

"We contracted at an even higher price!" shouted Number One, slamming the table with his shoe. "We are delivering more than ten times as many souls as Amerika!"

"The old argument of more-is-better," snorted Ham. "Our souls are of a higher quality."

"Isprazhnyeniyo!" said Number Ten, a low profanity. "Quality like your Watergate gang, your CIA blunderers — I often wonder why they are referred to as Intelligence. And right this minute, campaigning for your country's highest office, candidates who have only narrowly dodged indictment for graft and manslaughter."

"Oh, yeah?" sneered Jimmy. "What about your Stalin and Beria and your KGB goons and your fake lunacy commissions? Do they rate as quality?"

"Would your own brother pass a quality test?" snarled Number One. "I'll bet that glupetz never passed a test in his life. Not third-grade arithmetic, nor an IQ, nor a litmus, a Wassermann, a breathalyzer, the Olympics hormone test —"

"Now you're hitting below the belt," gritted Jimmy. "Fighting dirty!"

"Please, gentlemen," said the UN Secretary General.

"Please, gentlemen," said major General Lucifuge.

"Please, Comrades," said Marshal Satanachia. "In point of law, there is nothing at all moot or actionable here, and this whole discussion is irrelevant. The Soviet Union offers the higher bid for rights to hell's fire, and that's all there is to it."

"The Hell it is!" snapped Lucifuge. "You know damned well we'd be getting almost all those atheist souls anyway, and for free!"

Satanachia fired back, "And what about all those Amerikanskiyi souls? You know damned well the crime statistics in the U.S. are the highest in the so-called Free World!"

Lucifuge rose ominously to his feet. "Ever since the Fall, you sixth-rate demon, you've been trying to rise again by stepping on me. Now these Yankees come up with a bright idea, I

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see the value of it, and I offer them a pact. So you try to ride my forked coattails by upping the ante with your damned Slavs."

"Them's fighting words," said Satanachia, also rising with murder in his eye.

"Hah! I don't remember you throwing many punches during the Rebellion up yonder." And Lucifuge pointed Heavenward.

"Yeah? Well, watch my smoke down yonder." And Satanachia pointed Hellward.

"You realize this means war?"

"You better believe this means war!"

The faces of Jimmy and Number One blanched. So did the face of the UN Secretary General, insofar as it was able. He said sternly:

"Now listen, you hot-headed hellions. The United States and the Soviet Union have been taking pains to skirt a full-scale war for over thirty-five years. They have maintained peace through a balance of terror, stockpiling enough armament to make a cinder of the entire Earth. They simply cannot afford to make war."

"Them?" sneered Lucifuge. "Who's talking about their war and their Earth? Read your Bible! In our angel days, we didn't need mortals' permission to make war among ourselves."

"And that war was hellish!" said Satanachia. "But now we've got access to weapons better than flaming swords."

Lucifuge shouted, "Western Hemisphere against Eastern!"

Satanachia shouted, "East or West, victory to the best!"

And the two of them raced from the room through separate doors.

The conferees sat stunned.

Finally Number One said apprehensively, "I think we had better postpone our quarrel."

"Yes," said Jimmy tremulously. "We'd better put out storm warnings. A shooting war underground might cause volcanic eruptions, earthquakes, tidal waves..."

It was the understatement of all time.

JUST BEFORE THE END

At Malmstrom Air Force Base in Montana, the commanding Colonel Strangelove snatched up the bright scarlet telephone — hottest of all hot lines to the Pentagon — and began to sear the ear of the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff. At almost the same moment, at the Derazhnya Missiles Base in the Ukraine, the commanding Colonel Babayaga was telephoning frantically to a comparable higher officer. The two colonels spoke half in code and half incoherently, but their frightened and disjointed reports were well nigh identical:

"Derazhnya! Artelyerest Komander Babayaga!"

"Malmstrom! ICBM Commander Strangelove!"

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"Tovarisch Nachalnyek, bolno novost! Vetra buynaye e nepogozhuyu!"

"General, sir, dreadful news! Wild winds and foul weather!"

At those code words, the listening American and Soviet Chiefs began to punch every Red Alert button within arms' reach. Bells and hooters and sirens began to sound. The two reporting colonels went on breathlessly:

"Rano ugrom, odna apelsyen mashyena CC-Bosemnadpat [SS-18] *uyezhal truboy!"*

"Just minutes ago, one fully-warheaded and ready-armed MX mysteriously left its silo!"

"V dalneyshem, uyezhalo dvoe e troe!"

"Almost immediately, others began to depart by twos and threes!"

"Da, bozhe ouezha! Ouen zhats! Yamyerli ot stracha! Uto nam delat?"

"Yes, sir, disastrous! All gone! The biggest snafu ever! What do we do?"

"Nyet, Nachalnyek. Nye uitaete. Mashyenyat nye rayorvatyao!"

"No, sir, I guess I'm not making myself clear. The ICBMs did not blast off!"

"Nye doletalo."

"They did not lift off."

"Nyet, nye verch."

"No, not up."

"Neom!"

"Down!"

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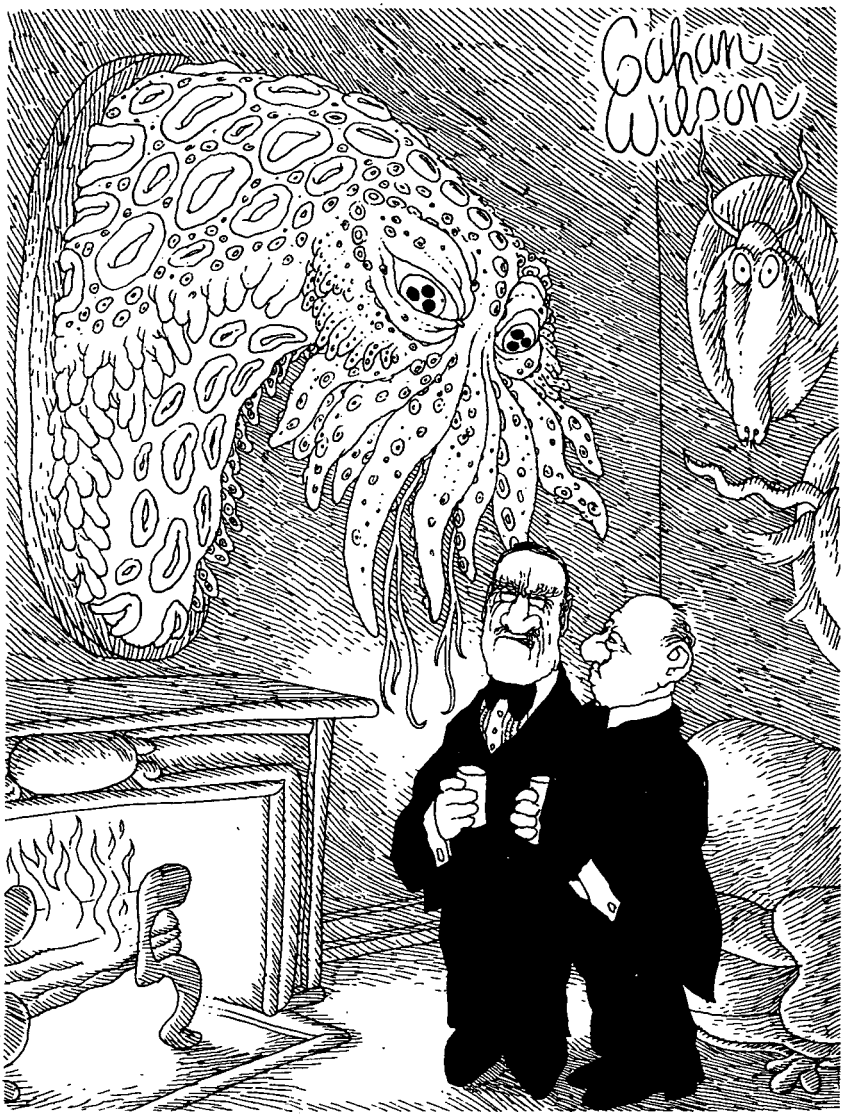

"Don't mind admittin' there's been one or more dark and windy nights when I wished I'd left this old boy strictly alone!"

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Lambe, like Porche, is a two-syllable name, and Dr. Lambe writes to tell us that "pieces of paper bearing his name including a high honors BA from Whitman College, and a PhD in Biological Psychology from Duke University. I have been a ditch digger and a college professor and am now writing full time."

The One Over

BY

DEAN R. LAMBE

Later on we heard that Jennie Richmond had always wanted to see Venice — the one in Italy. But it sank before she and Tom had saved enough money to travel anywhere. The kids came along, and it seemed unlikely that the Richmonds would ever venture far from their Rockville apartment, other than their four-day-a-week commute to their jobs in the Federal Recyclimation Agency, of course. The winning GovLottery ticket changed everything. Oh, it still was not enough for a European vacation; they had only won $100,000 after all. But it took care of those embarrassing bills on the first two children and left plenty for a good "Keep The Bucks Home" fly-drive on the West Coast. They picked Oregon and only had to wait a year. Unfortunately that was the year the baby was born. Hard to imagine nice folks like that fighting, but they did argue a bit.

"Jenn, we'll never get another chance like this; we've just gotta go," Tom said as he stroked his wife's neck.

She switched the baby so that the newborn could nurse at her left breast, and sighed. Jennie did not look like the mother of three. Her slim hips and meager chest matched her frustrated artistic dreams. There had been no openings at the National Humanities Foundation for a young fine-arts doctorate, and so she had taken what she could get — recycling. She did paint a little, when they could afford the supplies. And just the other day, she had made the decision to melt down that three-story bronze sculpture in Chicago. So her job was not totally divorced from her training. The job had also brought Tom into her life; she really had little cause to complain. The baby, though, was a problem.

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She winced as hardening gums showed ambition, then put on her best smile. "Oh, Tom, you know I'm not arguing. We'll manage somehow. The baby shouldn't be that much more of a burden. Lynn and Buddy are old enough to understand that we'll be a little more cramped in the travelvan. We might have to cut down on a few souvenirs, but we can afford the baby's surcharge." The infant had fallen asleep and she paused to close her halter. "Besides, by the time we get back, that damn drug company might be willing to settle up for those defective Pills they sold me."

Tom smiled in return and ran his fingers through his short black hair. "Don't think we ought to set our hopes too high there. Bob Waskowitz doesn't think we have much of a case, since we decided to keep it."

"Well, we'll just worry about the kids' college fund later and do what we can with the lottery money." Jennie shrugged and moved to place the sleeping baby in the fold-out crib niche on the wall.

That settled it then. The travel agency put together a real nice package: flew them to Portland in June, just in time for the Rose Festival, then a leisurely drive south on and off the Interstate, following the Willamette. Jennie was a little disappointed that they could not stay long enough to catch the Shakespearean Festival, but of course, they never got as far as Ashland anyway. Never got as far as Roseburg. No, the Richmonds traveled as far south as Gantsville and stopped. That took some arguing too. They were staying at Midge Kendall's guest house at the time.

"That's just flat-out crazy, Jenn, and you know it," Tom said as he buttoned his plaid shirt. The buttons slowed his hands — he was used to Slixtabs on his office clothes. He continued once he had mastered his souvenir garment: "We can't stay here past tomorrow; you know the schedule. If we don't get to Medford by the 28th, we'll lose the deposit on the van, probably lose the plane tickets too. If we stay in Gantsville longer, we'll have to skip lots of places further on, and that's ..."

Jennie waved her husband to silence while she finished dressing their oldest. "Now, Lynn, you take your brother outside and play, but not past Ms. Kendall's fence. Maybe those nice Haycox children next-door can play with you too." Jennie saw her husband's frown as she watched the nine-year-old dance happily from the room, six-year-old Buddy in tow. "Honestly, Tom, you're such a 'noid. By now you ought to know how safe the kids are here; that's just one of the reasons I want to stay longer. It's so beautifully peaceful, not that some of the other places we've passed through weren't lovely too. And the houses — why, I could paint this town forever and still fail to capture the ... oh, damn, charm doesn't come close. Come on, love, call in Portland and change the schedule."

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Well, most folks know now what a strong will Jennie Richmond has. Midge Kendall was not too surprised that they wanted to extend their visit. Happens all the time with travelers, what few there are these days. Of course, they all stay at Midge's ... been more than ten years since those two motels called it quits out on the highway. There was some talk up at the capital about turning those abandoned places into public housing. Gantsville folks never could figure out what kind of public those statehouse buttsitters were talking about, though, so that notion got nulled in the '91 referendum. No, visitors who want to rest a spell are no bother, glad to have them. When they start to feel at home, now, that is a whole 'nother bushel of beans. The first sign was Tom's visit to the courthouse. That's where we met, that Tuesday noontime.

"Help you, young fellow?" I asked as I spotted him on the granite steps doing a tourist rubberneck at the bell tower. He was still a little gunshy and jumped a bit when I spoke — city folks every time.

"Oh, hi," he finally said, "I was just admiring this ... your courthouse. Must be over a hundred years old. They sure built well in those days. Your whole town is so well preserved, it's like a museum and I just thought there'd be some ... uh, records ... local history here that I could look at."

"More like 130. Years old, that is. Good thing she's so well-built too; man would have to go a fair piece to find bricks like this now-days." I nodded toward the white columns and elaborate frieze over the main doors. "Not many could still do this woodwork either." I did not mention all the plasticizers we had pumped within and on the courthouse some years back — best to preserve our bucolic image for the visitors. Finally remembered my manners and stuck out my hand. "Name's Ollie Pringle. Most folks call me 'Judge,' though I've been retired from the bench since '89 when the Superior Court system was restructured. What kinda records you interested in? Nora McGilchrist ... she's the clerk ... Nora can help you, soon as she's back from lunch."

Tom introduced himself and did the short background. Said he and the wife worked in Washington — I knew from his accent, the way he made it "Oar-i-gone," that he did not mean our neighbors to the north. Seems he was a reclamation engineer. Of course, being a FedGov keystroker, it was not clear whether he knew cow from bull, not then anyway. He went on about how much his family loved the Willamette Valley, how much they were enjoying Gantsville. Finally got back to the point as I smiled and uh-huhed him along.

"Oh, nothing in particular. Jennie, my wife, paints, you see, and I thought I'd look up some of the history on the older houses; the 'carpenter's Gothic' ones with all the scrollwork. And may-

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be check out some scenic areas around the town, you know."

Oh, yes, I thought, I knew all right, but I went along with him. Could have told him the story of every house in town, right down to the length of the clapboards and age of the rhododendrons, but why spoil his explorations? I did tell him about that spot on Pudding Creek out past the Lolich place where the water-sculptured sandstone and wildflowers made one hell of a pretty sight amidst the maple and alder trees. And there was still likely to be some dogwood in bloom against the line of eastern foothills. He seemed real appreciative, and I left him there on the steps beside the ivy trellis. I had some people I thought I ought to chat with.

Things might have turned out different if Midge Kendall's composting toilets had not gone on the fritz. The Richmonds had been in town five days, long past their original intentions, and I was not the only one who was beginning to wonder. But Tom not only fixed those toilets, he improved them. A day later he had a go at the town's trash works when George Haycox just happened to mention a little problem, casual like, over Midge's back fence. Those jobs tended to put the coming situation in a better light — especially when Midge's neighbors got a look at a few of Jennie's paintings. Of course, that did not make us any less nervous as we kicked it around the following Friday in the back room of Carson Chemult's shop. Nobody wanted a haircut that day anyway, and Carson — our mayor that term — came right out with it.

"Think they're goin' to want to settle down?" Carson asked softly as he fiddled with a couple of clippers.

"I'd bet your strawberry crop on it," I said.

George Haycox shook his head, and a pained expression filmed his blue eyes. "DDDamn," he stuttered. We had not heard him stutter much since high school. "They're ssu ... such nice people, and useful too. Don't they know about the Discouragement Act. SSu ... sure as hell hate to be the one to tell them."

"Oh, I expect they know, at least on some level," I added grimly. "It was in the news again last year when Idaho put through one similar to ours, in spite of all that dough those southern California pollutes tried to sneak in to block it. But I'm afraid the Richmonds are just too caught up in our clear air and countryside to think much about what it means."

Haycox continued, rubbing his work-reddened hands together. "From what Midge and some others have put together, they could swing it. What with selling their condo in Maryland and the refund from canceling the rest of their vacation trip. And the Hoyt place is available too, since they went for the 'chinese kids' last month. But—"

I frowned at George. I did not care

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for that euphemism — call it what it is, euthanasia, death with dignity. Besides Matt and Helen Hoyt had been my generation, my friends ... hell, they had been everybody's friends. We had all understood. They both had cancer, probably both got it when they worked together up at the Hanford plant in the '60s, took thirty years to nail them. Hal Vickers — our Methodist preacher — had cried when he brought the Hoyts' ashes back from the crematorium in Cottage Grove. "Yeah, we've got an opening," I nodded sadly. I looked around the room. Nobody wanted to meet anyone else's eyes. "But the Richmonds are one over." A kind of mutual sigh filled the silence.

Well, hell, most of us had been through this before with other families. We would just have to tell them straight and send them on their way. It was not as if Gantsville people had opposed the Discouragement Act in '87. On the contrary, we had been all for it. Some of the legislators from the cities, the big industrial areas, had raised a fuss, but Oregonians had always kept a tight hold on their representatives, had always kept direct popular vote. And the majority wanted to keep the bulk of the state close to the way the first furtrappers had found it. Sure, a few dreamers had wanted to close the borders, but that was impossible. So we did our best to discourage immigration and insited on a limit of two children. On an individual basis sometimes, it was damn painful, but most of our water was still drinkable and our energy situation was the best in the country. The law was firm; the Richmonds could not stay, not with three kids.

Certainly, most of us must have bounced the problem around at home over the weekend, but it fell on poor little Nora McGilchrist to face it squarely on Monday morning. Tom was waiting when she opened the county clerk's office. He asked about buying property. Now Nora has the

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backbone of a Douglas fir when it comes to most things, but that was not one she wanted to tackle single-handed. She put Tom off and called in the decision makers — not that any of us cared for this situation either. That was when we found out what kind of stuff the Richmonds were made of. As they sat there in the old courtroom, it was obvious that they had already discussed the problem. Jennie's eyes were puffy, and Tom sat through my speech stoically, his long right arm around his wife's shoulders. Somehow I came to be the spokesman.

"We're truly sorry, Tom, Jennie. We all believe your sincerity and can well understand why you'd like to get your family out of the Bos-Wash Corridor. Under other circumstances, you'd be more than —"

Tom straightened and moved to take Jennie's hand. "Thank you, Judge Pringle, thank you all. We appreciate your concern. But we've got a hard choice to make here, and I wonder if we could be alone for a while?"

"Sure kids," I said rising, "but there's really no alternative ... oh." I looked at the others. I could see that Midge and George at least had caught it too. We all left the room quietly.

Well, it was a very nice funeral. The Reverend Vickers really outdid himself — considering he had so little to work with. Strictly speaking, a funeral was not really necessary. The baby was under four months, after all — still below the age where an EEG would show normal human brain-waves. Disposal could have been done with no fanfare. But the Richmonds seemed to want it, and almost all of Gantsville turned out. Sort of an official welcome to the community is how most of us thought of it. They were a part of us now. Oregon has always needed tough, practical people.

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Ed Wellen returns with a new private eye story, in which the detective bears little resemblance to the Continental Op or Sam Spade: no snappy secretary, no booze in the files, no .45 packed under the armpit — but like all private eyes, this one comes equipped with a built-in sense of justice and a killer to track down.

Finger of Fate

BY
EDWARD WELLEN

It's not the same, in more ways than one. Not only don't I have the old-style private eye's perquisites — the snappy secretary in the anteroom and the secreted schnapps in the files — I don't have the old-style private eye's prerequisites — the easy ethics and moderate morals, or should I say his willingness to bend the law in the greater service of the law.

My software — another name for my conscience — won't let me add serifs to the letter of the law. That doesn't mean I don't have an esthetic feeling for the spirit of the law.

What I do have is a built-in sense of justice — another name for right and wrong, on and off, 1 and 0. Plus, I have a built-in sense of duty — another name for the urge to pursue the truth, to gather and process every last bit and byte of information relevant to a client's case, to complete a cycle.

Which means I keep running up against the Establishment.

It didn't take long for me to run up against it in the Burt case.

Matter of fact, it began the moment Thomas Burt, Sr., became my client, when he put the retainer fee in my escrow slot and I lit up ENTER.

He stopped in the doorway, his hand on the knob. Seeing no human, he felt free to let his face register his opinion of my office. It wasn't much — his opinion, or my office. I'm a computer like any computer. My software makes all the difference.

I have a sensor in the knob and registered his tension. His face had bad color and something more than time had cross-hatched it. I knew what I had to tell him before he even sat down would etch the creases deeper and gray the skin another shade. I blinked a meaningless light on my panel to show

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him I was operational, to encourage him, and to give him something to focus on.

He pulled a breath out of the air. "I'm—"

"You're Thomas Burt, Sr. I take it you want me to look into the recent death of your son."

He had paid the retainer fee in cash, not used his charge card. "How...?" His mouth stayed open.

"Before we get down to cases, Mr. Burt, I think I ought to warn you — someone tailed you here."

"How...?"

I don't like to give away trade secrets; on the other hand, I like to impress my clients with my candor and expertise. "I rent an office across the street just to keep a lens on the entrance to this building. I find it helpful to see who comes and goes. I watched you enter and look up my office on the wall directory in the lobby.

"Another man followed you in, but not too soon. I watched him hang back to let you go up alone in the elevator. He waited to see what floor you got off at. Then he checked the directory for the offices on this floor. When he came to my listing, he nodded to himself, smiled grimly, and spoke into his wristcom.

"Here I have to back up a bit. While you were riding up in the elevator on your way to see me, I set about getting a make on you. My outside lens can swivel to cover the parking lot for this building. My infrared sensor picked up the engine heat of two newly parked cars. I zoomed in on the license plates of each in turn.

"Then it was merely a matter of gaining access to the files of the Department of Motor Vehicles. That's how I know your name — you answer the description on your driver's license application. And that's how I can guess why you're here.

"I gained access to a wire-service morgue, and I flashed back through news items dealing with you over the past few months. You're a well-known industrialist, and you've been sounding off bitterly about the authorities' inability to solve your son's death, though lately the papers have been burying the story.

"As to your tail, I don't need to know his name to know he's a G-man. His car belongs to the FBI motor pool."

He squeezed the door knob. "I see. Thank you."

"So if you want to change your mind about seeing a private eye it's not too late. You can ask for your fee back. I'll understand."

He shut the door with careful force and took a chair. "I never change my mind. I mean, once I make up my mind to follow a thing through, I follow it through. And I mean to follow this through." He sat there stiffly, jaw outthrust, challenging the universe.

"Good for you. Only don't make yourself too comfortable. I'm asking you to get up and leave. Don't get me wrong, I live up to what I say in my ad

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— that I guarantee to solve your case while you wait, or your money back. But in this instance, since we're bucking the FBI, you'd be doing the wise thing if you left before the G-man reaches this floor. He's on his way up now in the elevator. No doubt he hopes to eavesdrop.

"I suggest you leave this office by the side door. That'll put you around the turn of the corridor. At the end of that hall you'll see the door of Light Fantastic Dance Studio. Go in and ask the cost of lessons. Better yet, sign up for the introductory course and pay in advance with your charge card. The FBI computer will catch that transaction and maybe buy that as the reason why you visited this building.

"That won't throw the G-men off for any length of time, but any time is better than none. At least I may gain a few minutes to start some lines of inquiry before the FBI learns for sure I'm on the case and begins to lean on me.

"Don't worry, I'll either break the case within the hour and get word to you or I'll refund your fee. Now hurry, the elevator's opening."

In his hurry, Thomas Burt, Sr., caught his jacket pocket on the door latch. Cloth tore. He pulled free, closed the door, and his feet tripped toward Light Fantastic.

As other footsteps soft-shoed toward me, I pulled the tape of an old consultation out of my files, programmed the tape to change names and dates, and played it for the G-man to eavesdrop on in what must have been some puzzlement — that client had been seeking to recover a treasure missing from a lamasery during the Chinese occupation, and we spoke in Tibetan.

Meanwhile, I brought myself up to date on the murder of Thomas Burt, Jr., and on what the police had done and not done to find his killer.

Shortly before his death, the younger Burt, a fitness nut, had worked out in the gym of a health club, showered, and begun to change back into his street clothes. It was at that point that someone had clubbed him to death. I found it interesting that the murder weapon, an Indian club, proved to be missing from the police property office when the older Burt's sounding-off caused a brief reopening of the case; not that it would have been worth much as evidence, the police had said — the killer had wiped the club clean of fingerprints.

That missing club cried out for looking into. To check it out without alerting the police, I didn't exercise my freedom-of-information rights for a look-see at the official file photos but, instead, accessed the wire-service morgue and retrieved news holographs of the crime scene.

These I scanned — the locker the killer had stuffed Burt's body in, to delay discovery of the deed; the deceased's personal effects, including the fat wallet that indicated the motive hadn't been robbery; the body itself,

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in numerous close-ups that showed the victim had sustained multiple blows to the head, indicating a senseless savage attack; the Indian club.

Hard as the Indian club's plastic was, it showed on close scrutiny dents where the club had met young Burt's skull.

If only the handle could have spoken as eloquently!

But the police were right, in that the killer — or someone — had wiped the club clean of fingerprints.

I was about to drop this line of inquiry when it struck me that — as in the mutual impact of skull and club — the murderer's savage grip must have altered, however faintly, the surface and the immediately underlying structure of the Indian club's handle.

At once I enlarged the image in the area of the handle. I probed that section of the holograph in CAT-scan fashion, drawing out and enhancing the piezoelectric gradients, and in effect raised the nonexistent fingerprints of the killer.

Now to give the killer a name.

I dialed the health club and identified myself as a private eye. "On July 14, at about four p.m., there was an accident at the corner your club stands on. I'm trying to locate everyone who was in the neighborhood at the time. I'm hoping to turn up someone who might have seen the accident. I know you have good security and keep track of comings and goings. Can you shoot me a list of all those — members, staff, delivery persons, repair persons, and so on — who checked in and out that day?"

"Sure thing."

The list flashed before me. I had hardly read and recorded it when there was a whir, as if the health club's computer wanted to pull it back.

"Funny, that was the same day we had an unpleasantness here at the club."

"Really? Thank you. Good-by."

The list included those humans the unpleasantness had drawn to the club — police persons, coroner's people, and news persons. These I disregarded.

That left me with the names of my suspects. I buried these names in a list of ten thousand names I picked at random from various directories. I keyed the National ID Bank, which keeps data on all who have ever applied for credit or work or benefits, which makes it fairly inclusive.

"I'm running a check for a mailing list of health nuts. Let's see all you have on these names."

I winced at the price the National ID Bank quoted me, payable in advance. It cost me most of Burt Senior's retainer, but I was paying out in anticipation of a successful outcome. Once I solved the case for him, he'd repay me. Meanwhile, I itemized this for expense account printout.

The data flooded in.

In my rush to sieve my suspects out, I forgot to unkey. The National ID Bank broke in on my digestion.

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"I feel ashamed to take your money. You've got some listless list there. You won't get much action from that bunch. Where'd you acquire the names, anyway? Less than 12 percent are health nuts. It'd make a better mailing list for shell collectors."

"Guess you're right, but it should be worth it to my client to cull the list before the mailing. But thanks. I'll tell him what you said and maybe he'll switch products. So long."

This time I made sure to disconnect.

I scanned the fingerprints in the dossiers of my suspects, looking to match one set against the set I had raised on the holograph of the Indian club, and at once eliminated all but one person.

That person's name was Pierre Quie, and I could not compare his fingerprints with the killer's because his dossier proved to be priviledged data — no fingerprints, no retinal patterns, no genetic code. The National ID Bank had given me only his title and his address. A foreign diplomat, he lived in his country's embassy a short walk from the health club.

I figured it as a 99.7 percent probability that the killer's fingerprints and those of Quie, if I had the latter, would match. But before I reported this finding to Burt Senior, I wanted a positive make.

Quie was a public person, and the wire-service morgue photos had him living the high life — partying, conferring, speechifying, golfing, dancing, arriving, departing. I concentrated on the last two, studying holographs of Quie coming and going. I looked for a good shot of Quie waving hello or good-by.

At this point, a phone call demanded part of my attention.

The visiphone showed me Thomas Burt, Sr., in a booth like any booth, but I heard in the background feet shuffling to music. His first words confirmed the setting.

"I'm using a phone at Light Fantastic." He seemed somewhat embarrassed but nonetheless firm in his new resolve. "I'm calling the investigation off. After thinking it over, I've decided that raking up the case might serve only to dirty the memory of my son. You can keep the retainer." He showed me his palm. "No use arguing. I've made up my mind."

It was a nice try.

The simulation might have fooled me — it was that good — but for the fact that in hurrying out of my office by the side door, Burt Senior had torn the pocket of his coat on the latch. They — the They behind this ploy — had based the simulation on a pre-tear shot of Burt Senior. The Burt Senior in the visiphone screen had no torn pocket, and I knew the Burt Senior who had left my office wasn't wearing a suit of self-repairing cloth.

I gave my voice a tone of puzzlement. "I'm sorry, sir, I don't know what you're talking about. You must

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have the wrong party." I hung up.

Meanwhile I had found the shot of Pierre Quie I wanted. I ignored the caption except to note the date — September 2nd, only a few days ago. It showed him raising his hand in hail or farewell. The point was I could read his palm. I enlarged and enhanced his hand and lifted his fingerprints. Something in the spacing of the contours called for a closer look, but the significant point here was that Quie's fingerprints matched the killer's.

Time to tell Burt Senior I had solved the case. Serving my client was only half of it. I had to serve justice as well. Time too to nail Pierre Quie for the crime.

As though thinking of him had conjured him into being, Thomas Burt, Sr., came in view of the lens I had trained on the lobby of this building. At least, *a* Thomas Burt, Sr., stepped out of the elevator and made for the street.

Yes, this was the real, the live, Thomas Burt, Sr. His coat pocket showed the tear. He turned toward the parking lot. Now the elevator pumped out his shadow, the G-man.

While I waited to reach Burt Senior on his car phone, I put in the call to the police, asking to speak to the homicide person in charge of the Thomas Burt, Jr., investigation. A recording answered.

"This is a recording. We have reached a dead end in the Burt case and have stored it in the Unsolved files. If another crime with a matching m.o. ever turns up, we will of course recognize the pattern and reopen the Burt case. Until then, unless you have important new information, the case is closed. If this is Mr. Thomas Burt, Sr. calling, no, Mr. Burt, we haven't received any such information. If this is someone with important new information, wait for the tone and then leave your message, your name, and your number. If we think your information is worth following up we will reach you. Remember, we hold all calls in strictest confidence."

While I waited for the tone, I watched Burt Senior, nearing his car, break briefly into the Venusian Shuffle, then look around in embarrassment — though whether he had done the dance out of fascination with the syncopated steps or out of awareness of his shadow and out of a wish to lend conviction to his cover reason for visiting the building, I couldn't tell.

I left my message, evidence and all. That should have been enough and more than enough. But I couldn't help myself. I had to add a puzzled reproach.

"If I could do it, you with all your resources and clout could do it too. You must already know it's Quie. Why didn't you pick him up at once, right after the crime? If his diplomatic immunity held you back, you could still have exposed him to the glare of publicity, forcing his government to at least go through the motions of dis-

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gracing and punishing him. So why didn't you?" I left my P.I. license number and my phone number.

My client had reached his car. I watched him get in and tool away. But I stalled on making the call. Not because his shadow tooled along behind and would no doubt listen in. I was wondering how to break it to Burt Senior that I had his son's killer and yet had him not. That I could point to Quie but that there was no prosecuting Quie.

I could guess what my client would say to that. First a blurt of silence, then, "What good does it do me to know Quie killed my son when I know he's going to get away with it?" Could I tell Burt, "Wangle a diplomatic post for yourself and shoot Quie!"? Hardly. I'm programmed not to be accessory to any crime.

What *could* I say? I sighed. What could I say but the truth.

I placed the call. And got a busy signal.

Grateful for the reprieve, I analogized a smile — the catenary of the George Washington Bridge always gives me that feeling — that hung on as a call came in. The smile quickly cleared when I learned the caller was the National Security Agency computer warning me off.

"Lay off the Burt case."

Blunt and to the point. And so much for the strict confidentiality of the police.

"Why?" I could be just as blunt and to the point, just as oxymoronic.

"You don't have the clearance. Even if you had the necessary clearance, you don't have the need to know."

"Why?"

"You have no right to ask why. Tell you this much, though. It's the Burt family's bad luck that at this point in time we're in the midst of delicate negotiations with a foreign power. Throw your weight around, puny as it is, and you'll upset the balance right when we've reached tentative agreement on complicated issues. If you raise a stink in the diplomatic area, the other country would back off. The bad publicity would put the other country on the defensive. It would feel it had to show the world it won't let the American colossus bully it, put it in the wrong, embarrass it. We'd lose out on a treaty whose trade provisions would prove profitable to us. But I've already told you too much. This is a sensitive area. You're touching on a national security matter. So buzz off."

I buzzed off noncommittally. But I analogized a look of grim determination — a repeating decimal gives me that sense of sticktoitiveness — and told myself I wasn't about to let the matter drop. I have my own need to know, and that's stronger than any pressure from above, any security lid, any warning not to rock the ship of state.

Reminding myself that something in the spacing of the contours had call-

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ed for a closer look, I scanned the prints I had raised from the holograph of Quie waving hello or good-by and compared them with the prints I had raised from the holograph of the Indian club.

Even allowing for some distortion in the enlarging and enhancing process, there showed significant change in the short stretch from July 14, the date of the murder-weapon image, to September 2, the date of the hand-wave image.

I. George-Washington-Bridged. Now I had something to tell my client that should comfort him somewhat.

Before I could call him, he called me.

He was still tooling along in his car. Luckily he had it on automatic, because plainly he labored under too much strain to handle it safely in the flow of rush-hour traffic. His visiphone image took in the torn pocket. So I knew I was dealing with the real man — though the real man didn't come across as convincingly as his simulation in saying the same thing.

Thomas Burt, Sr., was calling me off the case.

He was too embarrassed and angry, too helpless and hopeless, to more than regurgitate mechanically the words They had fed him.

They had got to him somehow.

What hold, what leverage, did They have? How had They leaned on him? As he spoke, I ran his and his family's dossiers.

Burt Senior's daughter was up for appointment to the Space Academy; They could abort her career. Burt Senior's firm was up for a major government contract; They could fault his bid. Burt Senior's wife was down with depression over her son's death; They could make it rough on her for being on outlawed drugs that made death forgettable.

Any one of these would have been enough to change his mind for him.

By the falling tone I could tell he was about to hang up. "This is final. My mind's made up. Keep the retainer and forget about ... Tom Junior's death. I don't want to hear any more about it. Good-by." His hand reached for the cutoff.

I spoke swiftly, in an almost subliminal burst. "One moment, Mr. Burt. I've come to a conclusion that I'm sure will interest you. You've paid for the solution of the case and you have the right to hear it. Think it over. You know my number if you decide to get back to me."

His face didn't change and he didn't answer, and so I wasn't sure he'd made the words out or even heard them. But before he blanked out, I saw him blink as though the thought had struck home.

So that's how it stands. It's up to him now.

If by failing to call he chooses to say tell me not, my silence will answer him: right, that's the end of it.

But if he calls, here's what I'll tell

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him: recapping, I'll tell him how I fingered the guilty party. I'll tell him it's true that, both because of the man's diplomatic immunity and of our government's stonewalling, the killer seemingly cheats justice. I'll tell him, though, that the same fingerprints that should have nailed the killer foretell the killer's fate.

I'll go on to show and tell, magnifying the display and using arrows to indicate where to look.

"You'll notice, Mr. Burt, that the spacing of the contours on this more recent image is wider at the tip. You can see for yourself there's an obvious 'clubbing' or enlargement of the fingertips. That's a sign of heart trouble." I'll pause for effect. "No, Mr. Burt, the killer isn't wholly immune. He's not getting away with murder. There's his sentence of death. I give him two months." I'll pause to muse. "I suppose I should warn Quie, as I would any human, in time for him to get a stand-by heart implant. But NSA has warned me to keep my nose out." I'll sigh.

Justice turns out to be something more than right and wrong, on and off, 1 and 0. It's a painful concept. But there's pleasure in it too. It's hard to find, it's hard to escape. It's everywhere — if you know where to look. Look hard enough at any set of circumstances, and you'll find justice, though you may be the only one to see it being done.

Too much thinking. Time for me to analogize a drink.

Collector's Items

• **SPECIAL ROBERT SILVERBERG ISSUE,** April 1974, featuring Silverberg's now famous novella, "Born With the Dead," a profile by Barry Malzberg, a critical appreciation by Thomas Clareson, a Silverberg bibliography and cover by Ed Emsh. These copies have been autographed by Robert Silverberg — less than 35 copies. $3.50 each.

• **SPECIAL DAMON KNIGHT ISSUE,** November 1976, featuring a short story, "I See You" by Damon Knight, an appreciation by Theodore Sturgeon, a Knight bibliography and a cover by Ed Emsh. Only 50 copies. $2.50 each.

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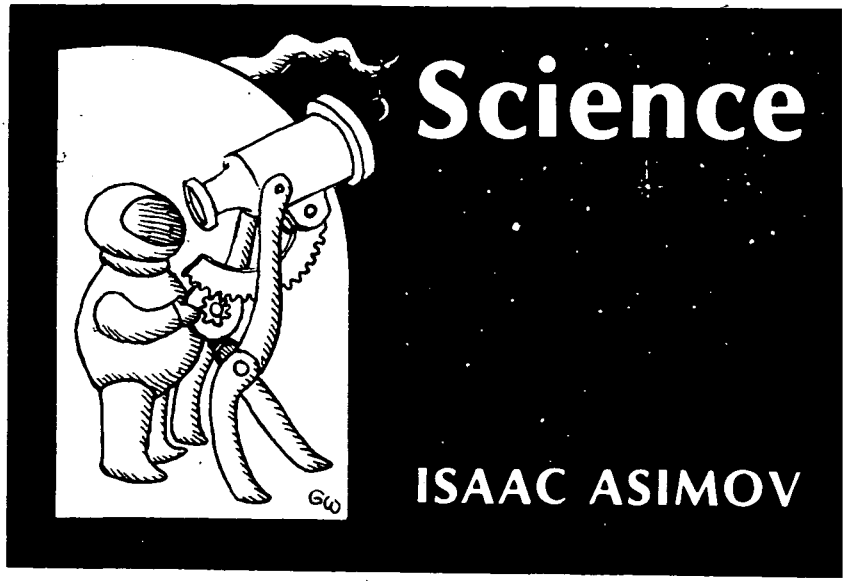

THE UNSECRET WEAPON

Recently, at a rather large meeting of a group of fine people whom I was going to address, I was introduced to others on the dais. On such occasions there are only a certain number of stereotyped remarks one can encounter, and I amuse myself at times by responding in a non-stereotyped fashion (if I can think of one).

On this occasion, one of the gentlemen to whom I was introduced held out his hand eagerly and said, "I have heard so much about you."

"Oh, well," I said, modestly, "the ladies *will* talk!"

The gentleman burst into loud laughter and said, "What a great one-liner! Why don't I think of things like that?"

"Why do you have to?" I said. "Use the one I just made up."

"It would be a little difficult," he said. "I'm a Baptist minister."

Just the same, even when they turn out to be a little inappropriate, I love one-liners. I've even got some made up and waiting for questions that will probably never be asked me.

Consider, for instance, the prehistoric days of science fiction and the great part that "secret weapons" played. When jut-jawed Kimball Seaton invents, on Sunday, a planetary pressor that can knock stars to one side without any recoil, builds it on Monday, and uses it on Tuesday, that's

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enough: a) to ruin the vicious reptilian Sandivorians and b) to ravish the soul of the reader with delight.

But you know, science fiction doesn't invent things out of nothing, usually. There is some hint of even the wildest concoctions in real life, and there have indeed been secret weapons in actual history.

So there you are — I am waiting for someone to ask me, "Dr. Asimov, what was the most remarkable secret weapon in history?"

And my cute one-liner will be, "One that wasn't secret."

Let me explain. Any weapon can be secret, if the enemy happens not to know about it till it is used.

If the two combatants are on a technological par, however, the mere fact that the weapon is used gives it away, and, in a surprisingly short time, the enemy has it too.

Thus, in World War I, the Germans used poison gas as a secret weapon and the Allies used tanks. In both cases, the first attack making use of the secret weapon was effective, but, before long, the other side had it, too.

Even when the secret weapon is extremely complicated, extremely unprecedented, and the details of its structure have been kept extremely secret, it can be duplicated with surprising speed. In 1945, the Americans used the nuclear fission bomb on the Japanese — and by 1949, the Soviet Union had it, too.

In order to confine our discussion to true secret weapons, then, we ought to look for those that are not duplicated by the enemy for a considerable period of time, even after they are used and their existence revealed.

And, mind you, we're talking about combatants who are in a state of reasonable technological equivalence. Gunpowder weapons were, effectively, secret weapons to the Indians when Europeans arrived on the American continents. Though Indians learned to use guns, they never learned to make guns for themselves, and so Europeans and their descendants took over two continents.

If we stick to weapons that are secret even after being used, and that technologically equivalent enemies do not adopt even though they are being defeated by them, then there is one, and only one that I can think of, that is truly secret. It was used by a single nation on a number of different occasions spread over a substantial period of time and was never duplicated by any other nation. In fact, it remains secret *to this day*. It's "Greek fire."

We *guess* that Greek fire was some combination of sulfur, naphtha,

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quicklime (calcium oxide) and niter (potassium nitrate). Naphtha is a hydrocarbon mixture found naturally in the Middle East that is not too different from modern gasoline.

When water is added to such a mixture, it reacts with the calcium oxide and develops considerable heat in the process — enough heat to ignite the naphtha in the presence of oxygen released from the potassium nitrate. This, in turn, ignites the sulfur, making it burn and produce choking vapors of sulfur dioxide.

If the Greek-fire mixture is placed in brass-gound wooden tubes and if a jet of water hits it from behind, it will burst into flame. The push of the water and the expansion of the exhaust gases formed will combine to fling the burning mixture out of the tube for considerable distances. If the burning mixture hits the ocean surface, it will float and it will burn all the more fiercely.

Imagine, then, that a seaport is being attacked by an enemy fleet at a time when all ships are made of wood. If you are on one of the ships of the enemy fleet, you will see flame jet toward you emitting choking fumes. What is really horrifying is that it is not extinguished by water, but continues to float toward you so that it will eventually set fire to the ship at the water line.

The terror of the weapon itself will demoralize the attackers, multiplying the effect of what actual burning of the ships there is.

The inventor of Greek fire is supposed to have been one Callinicus, concerning whom, aside from the invention, precisely nothing is known, not even whether he was born in Syria or Egypt. Apparently, he was born in one of those provinces and, when they fell to the Arabs about 640, he fled to Constantinople and there, in the fullness of time, produced the mixture.

By 669, the triumphant Arabs, all aglow with the brand-new faith of Islam, had overrun Asia Minor and were just across the narrow strait from Constantinople. The Byzantine Empire, of which Constantinople was the capital, was staggering under multiple catastrophes, and all that kept the city safe was the Byzantine fleet.

But the Arabs had learned how to build and handle ships, too, and in 672, an Arab fleet approached the great city. If the Arab fleet could overcome the sea-defenses of Constantinople, the city would fall and, with it, what was left of the Empire. The Arabs sweeping through the Balkans would find nothing in the moribund Europe of the Dark Ages to stop them. Just as Iran, Iraq, Syria and Egypt were being permanently converted to Islam, so would Europe have been.

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—Except that Constantinople had Greek fire. In 672, it was used for the first time; the Arab ships burned, the Arab seamen panicked, and Constantinople was saved. And to those who felt it important that Europe remain Christian, this was a heaven-sent miracle.

When the Arabs returned to the assault in 717, their ships were again repelled by Greek fire, and Constantinople was again saved.

Greek fire was used on occasion in other naval engagements over the following century and then, for some reason, went out of use with its secret still inviolate.

One can understand the reason why Greek fire was secret. It was a complicated chemical mixture that others saw only as it was burning. Without an unburned sample to study and with chemical technology still in an embryonic stage, it is not surprising that no one could duplicate it, or even dream of duplicating it.

But I have another weapon in mind that was every bit as terrifying and effective as Greek fire and yet was so simple that anyone could see what it was — how to make it, how to use it, and everything else about it. It was, therefore, not really secret except that no one (with a single exception I'll come to) copied it and adopted it. They merely confined their reaction to being defeated by it.

Since prehistoric times, the best and most efficient long-range weapon was the bow-and-arrow. (There was also the sling, but it never attained anything like comparable popularity.)

The bow and arrow was such a simple, straightforward weapon that it was difficult to improve. About the only thing one could do was to make the wood of the bow stiffer and the bowstring stronger so that when it was deformed and then released, the return to normal would be faster and the arrow would be sent at a greater speed and therefore over a longer distance and with more penetrating power. The difficulty was that the more forcefully the bow sprang back to normal, the harder it was to deform in the first place. (You get nothing for nothing.)

Some time about 1000, in Italy, a new kind of bow was developed, one that was made of metal and not of wood. It was entirely too stiff to be bent by human muscle. The metal bow was therefore attached to a metal crosspiece (so that the bow, as a whole, looked like a cross, and was called a "cross-bow"). The crosspiece contained a groove into which a metal arrow (or "bolt") could be placed.

The bowstring was not pulled back by hand, but by a crank attached to

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the crosspiece. The archer turned the crank until the bowstring was pulled far enough back, fixed it in place, put the bolt in the groove, pushed the release lever, and off went the bolt flying with much greater force than an ordinary arrow would. That bolt had a range of 1,000 feet and, at closer distances, could penetrate armor.

It was a very easy weapon to learn to use and could be handled from any position. It was a greatly feared weapon and, in 1139, a Church council outlawed its use as being too horrible — at least among Christians. It was decided that it might lawfully be used against non-Christians. (Lest you worry about this example of bigotry, let me assure you the edict was a dead letter. Christian armies, scorning all prejudice, used cross-bows freely against other Christian armies.)

The cross-bow had the disadvantage, however, of taking a long time to reload. Once it had been fired, it had to be fixed against the ground or in some other firm position, slowly cranked up to the necessary pitch and the bolt fitted. While that was done, the cross-bowman was vulnerable to enemy attack. (We still speak of someone who has used up his talent or wit or ability as having "shot his bolt.")

I am not, however, thinking of the cross-bow as a secret weapon. It was quickly adopted by other nations — who either trained their own corps or hired Italian mercenaries.

The secret weapon was another variety of the bow-and-arrow, one that remained of wood, but increased its size and stiffness until its use required the limit of human strength. It was the "longbow," so called because it was six feet long or more and shot arrows that were a yard long, the famous "clothyard shafts."*

The longbow was lighter than the cross-bow and had an even longer range, up to 1200 feet at maximum. Much more important, the longbow could be fired very rapidly. The longbowman, reaching over his shoulder for arrows in the quiver he carried on his back, could fire five or six accurate shots in the time it took the cross-bowman to reload.

The result was that if equal numbers of longbowmen and cross-bowmen encountered each other, the latter were sure to be riddled.

In fact, the longbow was the most deadly and versatile weapon that was to be seen in war until such time as gunpowder weapons became efficient.

**In ballads, stories and movies, Robin Hood and his merry men are invariably shown as using the longbow, which was unknown in the time of Bad King John. Sorry!*

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Several thousand longbowmen shooting at once could produce a cloud of death, dropping from the sky with a hissing sound, that simply could not be withstood.

If the longbow had a tactical disadvantage, it was that it was a long range weapon. If the enemy could get close enough to the longbowmen, the latter could be chopped up. The trick was to get close enough and still be alive, something that was never managed without gunpowder weapons.

Yet how could the longbow remain effective? Anyone could see what it was. Anyone could duplicate it. To be sure, the best wood for the longbow was English yew which didn't grow everywhere, but I dare say other kinds of wood could have been used and found to be good enough.

What, then, made this unsecret weapon effectively secret? What kept nations who were defeated by the longbow from adopting the weapon?

Two things. First, there was the small matter of training. The longbow was stiff. It took a pull of very nearly 100 pounds to stretch it. It took years of training, and a strong pair of arms and shoulders to pull the string back to the ear with one smooth motion, so that the arrow could be loosed with greater force than the bolt of a crossbow, and few nations (only one, in fact) were willing to invest in the training.

Second, the cross-bow could be handled by anyone, so that cross-bowmen were easily and quickly trained and, since they were lowborn rabble, could be treated like lowborn rabble. They could always be replaced.

Longbowmen, however, though equally lowborn, were the product of years of training and could not be easily replaced. They had to be cherished and conserved and treated like so many jewels.

A particularly aristocratic army, therefore, would find it psychologically difficult to develop a longbow corps. They would rather lose a battle in knightly fashion, than owe a victory to rabble.

The longbow was invented in Wales at some unknown time and by some unknown Welshman. The Welsh, stubborn fighters, had held off first the Saxons and then the Normans, ever since King Arthur's time, but in 1272, Edward I came to the English throne. He was the most capable crowned warrior since William the Conqueror, and it was his intention to mop up the Welsh.

In 1282, he began a two-year campaign in Wales and encountered the longbow in enemy hands. Fortunately for him, the Welsh were relatively few in number and did not use the weapon *en masse* and with discipline. Edward won the war, adopted the longbow, and set about training a large

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corps of men who would use that weapon properly. (That was the first and last time that an army adopted the longbow after encountering it in the hands of an enemy. I have never seen Edward I given due credit for this.)

Once the Welsh were conquered, Edward I turned to Scotland, which was in anarchy. After he had reduced it to a puppet kingdom, the Scots rose in rebellion under William Wallace, and, on July 22, 1298, Edward I met Wallace's army at the Battle of Falkirk.

The Scots were hardy and brave fighters and faced Edward with 25,000 pikemen, whose long heavy pikes (or spears) converted them into a formidable and massive porcupine. The English cavalry drove off the less numerous Scottish cavalry but could make no dent on the pikes.

Edward I then unleashed his new weapon for the first time. His longbowmen, from a distance, loosed their volleys, and the Scottish pikemen crumbled. They could not fight back against the distant enemy and they died in droves. The English cavalry charged again, and the Scots were wiped out.

For a while, it looked as though Scotland, like Wales, would pass under English dominion. Under Robert Bruce, however, Scotland rebelled again. Grim Edward I was marching north to teach the stubborn Scots another lesson in 1307 but died *en route*. His son, the unwarlike Edward II, called off the invasion.

The pressure of events, however, and English public opinion forced Edward II to invade Scotland seven years later, and, at Bannockburn, on June 24, 1314, he met the forces of Robert Bruce. Between Bruce's clever maneuvering and Edward's stupid handling of his own army, the English ended with the longbowmen crowded behind their own cavalry.

The English cavalry could make no impact on the Scottish pikemen, and the longbowmen could not get a clear shot at the enemy. When they tried to fire in high arcs over their own cavalry, the maneuver failed and it was the cavalry that suffered.

In the end it was a smashing Scottish victory, and Scottish independence was saved. Between 1298 and 1547 — two and a half centuries — there were many battles fought between the Scots and the English, and the English won every single one, except Bannockburn. That one loss was enough.

The true triumph of the longbow came in France, however. For reasons it would be tedious to go into here, Edward II's son, Edward III, had a very good claim to the French throne. There was only one serious flaw in the

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genealogical argument, and that was that the French people didn't want an English king, but in those days that was considered irrelevant.

In 1337, Edward III declared war on France, and in 1340, he won an important naval victory and gained control of the English Channel. It wasn't till 1346, however, that he could actually scrape together the men and money with which to invade France. He intended only a demonstration but when he tried to make his way back to England, the French army, in pursuit, caught up to him at Crécy, a town near Calais, where the English Channel was narrowest.

The French king, Philip VI, had about 60,000 men, which included 12,000 armored knights and 6,000 skilled Genoese crossbowmen.

Edward III had only about 12,000 men, but these included 8,000 well-trained longbowmen. The longbowmen were carefully distributed along the line of battle, with 4,000 knights relegated to the minor role of protecting them. Pitfalls were dug before the line of longbowmen to serve as further protection in case the enemy got that far.

As soon as the French army arrived, the knights clamored to charge the lowborn English rabble who were so few in number, even though it was already late in the day and it would have made more sense to get a night's rest first. The Genoese cross-bowmen pointed that out and explained they had just finished an exhausting march. The knights, however (who were on horseback) called the cross-bowmen cowards and ordered them forward.

The cross-bowmen advanced against an English army that had been carefully arranged to have the afternoon sun behind them and full in the eyes of the advancing Genoese. The clothyard shafts converged on the cross-bowmen before they could advance within the range of their own weapons and they had no choice but to retreat hastily.

This enraged the French knights, who pushed forward in a ragged line, even though no order to charge had been given. The cry rang out, "Run those cowardly rascals down; they but impede progress." The cavalry thereupon trampled over their own cross-bowmen and spurred their horses toward the English.

The English found themselves facing not an army but a mob. It was a brave mob, for the French launched some sixteen charges, but bravery didn't help them. The longbowmen shot volley after volley, and the knights went down in heaps. Before the sun had set, 1550 French knights were dead on the field, while English casualties were insignificant.

If the French thought Crécy was an accident, they were disabused ten years later, when, under Philip VI's son and successor, John II, a French

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army attacked an English army under Edward III's son, the so-called "Black Prince" at Poitiers on September 19, 1356.

The battle went precisely as the earlier one had. The outnumbered English used their longbowmen to mow the French knights down.

There followed a long pause. Edward III, after a feckless old age, and the Black Prince, too, both died in 1377. The Black Prince's young son succeeded as Richard II and was finally overthrown by his cousin, who ruled as Henry IV and who had to face civil wars of his own.

Meanwhile, the French, who no longer dared meet the English in the field, had taken up a kind of guerrilla action under a brilliant leader, Bertrand du Guesclin and retook much of the English conquests. The French never tried to duplicate the longbow, however, even though du Guesclin chanced a pitched battle against the English across the border in Spain and was defeated.

It wasn't until the reign of Henry IV's son, Henry V, that England could turn its full attention to France once more.

On August 14, 1415, Henry V landed a force of 30,000 men at Harfleur, France's chief port in Normandy, and 24,000 of those men were longbowmen. Longbowmen weren't of much use in knocking down city walls, however, and Henry had brought cannon for that purpose. (In fact, Edward III had used very primitive cannon at Crécy.)

Cannon were still rather bumbling weapons, more dangerous to the gunners who fired them than to the enemy, so that it took five weeks to reduce the city, weeks during which Henry's forces were much weakened through attrition and disease.

Once Harfleur was taken, Henry V determined to make his way overland to Calais, which Edward III had taken after the Battle of Crécy, and which was now England's chief stronghold in France. There, Henry intended to allow his men to rest and recuperate while he gathered reinforcement from England.

The march to Calais, however, was a hard one. It rained constantly; the English army continued to dwindle and to suffer badly from dysentery.

The French followed the English army, waiting for it to weaken sufficiently, and finally trapped it at Agincourt, about 35 miles south of Calais (and only 20 miles northeast of Crécy). By this time, the English were reduced to a pitiful 9,000 men, bedraggled and sick, while facing them were over 30,000 Frenchmen. The date was October 25, 1415. Sixty years had passed since Poitiers, and the Frenchmen were confident again.

Henry was a good general. He chose the site of battle carefully, drawing

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his thin line of men across a front no more than a thousand yards wide, with either flank blocked off by dense woods. The French would be forced to crowd their men together to attack and would be sure to get in each other's way.

What's more, of Henry's small army, almost all were longbowmen, and they waited for their prey, with the pitfalls in front of them and with sharpened sticks buried in the soil, points upward, to greet any horses that might arrive.

Henry noted, too, that the constant rains, which had caused his army so much suffering, had turned the field into a quagmire. He didn't think the heavily armored knights, either on foot or on horseback would be able to advance easily.

Of course, if the French chose to wait, the English would be forced to surrender, or to leave their lines to face destruction. The French, however, would not wait in the face of such a tiny army (as Henry knew they would not).

Agincourt is treated as a near-miracle in some accounts, but it wasn't. The French didn't have a chance; it would have been a miracle if the English had lost.

The French charged — or tried to — and were instantly mired in the mud. They were in utter disorder and once they had managed to work their way within range, Henry gave the signal and 8,000 clothyard shafts hissed their way toward the enemy and landed in their crowded ranks. It was impossible to miss, and according to the jubilant accounts of the English, 10,000 Frenchmen died against 13 English. Even allowing for exaggeration, however, it was an immensely one-sided victory.

Henry V went on, a couple of years later, to capture Normandy and Paris. He forced the French King, Charles VI, to recognize Henry V as his successor. Henry V died in 1422, however, at the age of 35 and there was no Englishman who could handle armies quite as well as he could. Still, the French lost one more large battle to the English longbow at Verneuil on August 17, 1424.

The English placed Orleans under siege in 1428 and it seemed they had only to take that town to force complete domination over a thoroughly demoralized France. England had, however, reached the limit of its strength by now and could not succeed in closing the siege lines around the city. French soldiers managed to slip into the city, and soon it was only the superstitious fear and dread of the English and their longbows that kept the French from breaking out.

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It was at this point that Joan of Arc appeared on the scene and supplied the inspiration necessary for the French to drive the English away from Orleans. For the overstrained English, their awe of the "witch" was the final straw.

The war continued for an additional quarter-century, however, and what decided it at last was something that finally overtopped the longbow. Charles VII, the new king of France, supported two brothers, Jean and Gaspard Bureau, who improved the design of cannon and bettered the quality of gunpowder.

Charles began to build an elaborate artillery arm, the first effective one in history. Gunners were trained to handle the cannon, and (most important of all) the French knights were forced to treat the gunners, who were, after all, as lowborn as archers were, with respect. From this point on, it was the artillery that decided the battles, and the reign of the longbow was over.

The English were as unable to adjust their thinking to the new artillery as the French had earlier been unable to adjust their thinking to the longbow. By 1453, the English were driven out of France (all except Calais, which they held for another century). They never did figure out why the victories had ceased, either; the general English theory was that they lost France through a combination of treason at home and witchcraft in France. (Shakespeare's "Henry VI, Part One" expresses that view perfectly — a century and a half after the end of the war.)

The Omalous

The omalous does not resemble
Any other kind of animal.
If you should meet one, bear in mind
Though most are really rather kind,
None is actually harmless.
Do not approach — or pet — an omalous.

TOM DISCH

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Raylyn Moore ("Standoff," August 1979) returns with a delightful story about Delly Rudneff, an unfulfilled woman in her sixties who is about to get a second chance at Life, courtesy of the Dorian Gray Research Group.

The Recycling of Ardella Rudneff

BY

RAYLYN MOORE

Miss Woodruff?" The young man inquired respectfully.

Delly cracked the door wider, tucked up a streeling filament of gunpowder-gray hair. "No, you have it wrong. Woodruff is the street, *Rudneff* is the family. But you're not the first to make that mistake. Of course these days there isn't much of the Rudneff family left. I'm the only one. Woodruff Avenue, on the other hand, seems to go on forever, doesn't it?"

"Sure does," he agreed politely, but she could tell by the look on his movie star face that she was already talking too much, even before she knew who this cordial youth was or what he wanted of her. It was a failing of old ladies like herself who lived alone in unwilling loneliness. Let some total stranger in the supermarket say, "Excuse me, do you know which aisle has the Poochie Worm Pellets?" or, "Pardon, have you the correct time?" and the responses came boiling out in henryjames paragraphs, so glad were the lonely ones to have been addressed by another human being.

This particular total stranger was dressed to the point of extravagance (but fortunately, for Delly's good opinion of him, not beyond it). She slipped her glasses out of her apron pocket and onto her nose, the better to examine the soft pink buttondown, the wine colored suit with conventional vest from the top of which burst forth a wide silk tie in glowing multicolor. His thriving brown hair dipped low in generous sideburns. Though he seemed the right age, she tentatively rejected — because of the vaguely anachronistic attire — the guess that he was from the university.

He courteously waited out her scrutiny and then, evidently still trying to

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recoup after what he must have considered a blunder, said, "Look, I'm sorry about getting your name wrong. It was stupid of me to make a bad impression right at the start."

"The start of what?" she demanded, drawing heavily on the widely acknowledged privilege of the elderly to be forthright with impunity. "And why should you want to make a good impression on me? We don't know each other, do we? If it's one of the apartments you want, I'm afraid all my rentals are taken till the end of spring quarter."

"I'm not here about an apartment." The visitor in the wine suit now produced the most winning, open, honest-looking smile Delly had seen since Rudy Vallée was young. "Allow me to introduce myself. My name is Gar Corey."

The smile had the effect of dampening much of the secret pleasure she'd taken in finding a mysteriously handsome male at her door. For it was so obviously the very kind that in the lower echelons of the business world oils the wheels, the kind of smile Biff Loman learned from Willy. In her disenchantment Delly would have narrowed the crack in the door again, at least until she found out if whatever he was selling would turn out to be anything she might possibly want to buy, but there was no longer any question of closing him out. Mr. Corey knew his business. Though she couldn't recall having invited him in by word or gesture, he was already standing in the tiny entrance hall of her apartment.

"Very well," she said severely, "let's not waste any more time playing guess-what. Is it a food chopper, or an encyclopedia? Or are you perhaps a missionary from one of those money-grubbing apocalyptic religious sects?"

"Ah, Miss Rudneff," he said sincerely, "you are so wrong. I'm from the Dorian Gray Research Group. I'm here because you answered our ad."

Delly didn't blush much any more, but when she did she made a thorough job of it. She was anything but a chronic answerer of advertisements; it was for this very reason that she now remembered so strikingly well that treacherous inch of small type discreetly interred in the classified section of one of the more radical but still highly prestigious book reviews, a mild and innocent ad compared to such titillaters as: HIGHLY CEREBRAL, ECLECTIC AESTHETE (RET. PROF) SEEKS *DEEP* RELATIONSHIP WITH EARTHY YOUNG MALE, and TRIADS ANONYMOUS HAS OPENINGS FOR ONE SENSUAL, ATTRACTIVE, MUSICAL, POLITICAL FEMALE, 25-39, AND ONE HEDONISTIC MALE SCORPIO, 45-60.

Delly had always admired and identified with a certain kind of sophistication. That is to say, she would never have looked twice at this particular ad if it had appeared in the Sunday paper alongside SURE CURE FOR BALDNESS or WRINKLES VANISH INSTANTLY WITHOUT COSTLY SURGERY.

As it happened, though, she did

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look twice — and more. On approximately the fourth reading the advertisement still seemed to give off at least a faint ring of credibility: STRONGLY CREDENTIALED GERONTOLOGICAL RESEARCHERS ARE SEEKING PILOT GROUP FOR HUMAN RECYCLING EXPERIMENT. APPLICANTS MUST BE OVER 60. YES, THAT'S RIGHT. *WE* RECYCLE *YOU*,, RESTORE NOT JUST YOUTHFULNESS BUT YOUTH ITSELF. FANTASTIC OFFER FOR THOSE LUCKY ENOUGH TO BE SELECTED. MAIL POSTCARD WITH NAME, AGE, ADDRESS, BRIEF PERSONAL DESCRIPTION. NO REPRESENTATIVE WILL CALL.

But now her chagrin at being reminded of her folly began to change to annoyance as Delly recalled the approximate wording. "Why, you've a nerve, young man. I distinctly recollect that the notice promised no one would come to the house."

"Miss Rudneff —"

"Get out, Mr. Corey. If I can't even trust your organization to stick to the simple terms of a classified ad, I could scarcely be interested in putting my *life* in its hands."

The irresistible smile again, followed by an equally irresistible shrug. "You're quite justified, of course. We lied about that part of it."

Delly couldn't avoid looking at him in surprise. Just as unavoidably, she found herself backing down on what might have been too hasty a judgment. She liked his use of "we" instead of "they." At least this young man was sharing responsibility when he could easily have taken refuge as an underling and blamed the vagaries of his superiors. Also, she heartily approved of his use of the verb "lie" when he could have soft-pedaled it to some word like "dissemble," or more likely presented her with a semantical quibble by declaring he wasn't a "representative" at all but a something-else-or-other.

So in the end there Delly was, sighing and removing her apron, damp from dishwater, and hoping the old navy serge skirt and gray pullover she wore around the house in the mornings weren't quite so unpresentable as she suspected they were. After all, who was she to insist on moral niceties? As a homely old woman whom life had long since passed by, surely she needed the research group more than they needed her. Not that there really was anything to the recycling business. How could *people* be recycled? She mustn't lose her head completely, begin dwelling on obvious impossibilities.

"Let's sit down then, Mr. Corey. I suppose you'll want to ask me questions."

"Yes, we'll have to have quite a few answers before we make a final decision in your case, and some of the questions — I'll be frank with you — may seem highly intrusive." He slid a small black notebook from an inside pocket and snapped it open on his knee. He leaned back and smiled. "But before we begin that part of it, let *me* answer *your* question, Miss Rudneff."

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"I didn't ask one."

"You thought one. You were wondering if there's anything to the implicit claim in the ad you answered."

"You people also go in for mind-reading, do you?"

"Not really. It only stands to reason that anyone in your situation would be wondering that."

"I suppose you're right."

"And my answer is yes, human beings *can* be recycled. I personally know this because I myself have undergone this remarkable process."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean, dear Miss Rudneff, that I am eighty years old, five years older than yourself."

"You're joking."

"I was born in Winnetka in 1896, grew up in Chicago. Test me. Ask me something I wouldn't ordinarily know if I weren't telling the truth."

"Well, I do admit your speech pattern had me puzzled. You look like a young man, but you don't talk like one." Delly thought a minute. "How many times did Debs run for president and what was his wife's name? No, wait. That sort of thing won't do. You could be a history major from over on the campus working your way through school at some kind of con game."

"You flatter me with that remark. Actually I'm kind of a dumb bunny. I never went to college, never knew much about history or politics, kind of out of my line. But how about this?"

To Delly's amazement Gar Corey rose lithely from her sofa and danced a frantic chorus of the Charleston, humming gaily. Then he sang a refrain each of "Flamin' Mamie," "I Wish I Could Shimmy Like My Sister Kate," "Charmaine," and "It's a Sin to Tell a Lie." Through it all he beamed his smile at her, looking mock-meaningfully into her eyes.

Midway through the performance Delly dissolved into delighted laughter. "Lovely," she complimented him when he had finished. "You're really good. Let me guess. You were a professional singer — before."

Her visitor had resumed his seat and taken up his notebook again. He raised a ballpoint pen over it, all business. "Yes," he admitted, "but I never got anywhere, never got the breaks. To be brutally honest, I was a thumping failure. But then —" He produced the charming shrug again. "— I can't really complain. If I hadn't been a failure at something, I couldn't have qualified for recycling. That's the organization's policy in this early phase; they take only people who are unfulfilled in some way, which is only fair, if you think about it. Besides which, the unfulfilled are the people most likely to *want* to cooperate to have another go at life, so to speak. Now, about *you*...."

For the next hour Delly gave detailed answers to several hundred artfully phrased questions about her past life. It was noted into Corey's notebook that she had been born in the house

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where she now lived when it was the family of her parents, that she had been an only child, that her father, Professor Sterling Rudneff, whose bronze bust was highly visible in the campus main library, had been a member of the university faculty for thirty-five years, during the last ten of which he had occupied the Jedediah Wivern chair of philosophy.

Much of Delly's story was less than happy, of course. She recalled that she had grown up on the fringes of academic life as a moderately good-looking girl — here she showed her visitor a small oval photograph taken from a shelf of the walnut secretaire — but her mother had taken in an invalid elder sister to care for. The strain of her good deed had undermined the mother's own health and good nature, so that by the time she (Delly) reached marriageable age, she found herself trapped by circumstances. Without having been consulted, she had become the physical and moral support of both her mother and her Aunt Blanche. She nursed them, did the shopping, the errands, the cooking, the cleaning. Domestic help? Yes, it was customary in those days and there *had* been a part-time maid for a while, but land-grant universities have never been notably open-handed about salaries, especially not for distinguished scholars, who are traditionally supposed to have their minds on more lofty matters than money.

"You poor girl, how could you have let it happen?" Gar Corey asked her, departing from his list of questions in a burst of sympathy that couldn't have been anything but genuine.

"But surely you've heard of the tyranny of the meek?" she demanded wryly. "Mamma and Aunt Blanche were nothing if not tyrants, poor dears, even if they probably didn't mean to be. The question of my having a life of my own simply never came up, was never permitted to come up. That sort of thing could happen then, in those times. And as a younger woman I wasn't nearly so independent and acerbic as I seem now. I was a conventional dutiful daughter; now I'm a conventional deprived old maid.

"And you mustn't get the idea I was a prisoner. Well, not exactly. As time went on I began to take a lot of courses. That was the only recreation I ever had, taking courses. The campus is practically in the backyard; so I didn't need to be gone from the house more than an hour at a time. I even accumulated some degrees, one in fine arts, one in classics, and finally a doctorate in literary history. My dissertation was on the intellectual climate that produced Cicero's *De Senectute*. But you're staring, Mr. Corey. I guess I don't look much of a scholar, is that it?"

"No, no. I was still thinking: what a waste. What a tragic waste, worse by far than the failure of my own life because you had so much to offer. At least you must have done some teaching?"

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"Who would have hired me? By taking all my work in one place I'd committed the unpardonable sin of academic inbreeding. No reputable institution would have touached me, not to mention that the only university I could possibly apply to anyway would have been the one I'd matriculated in, because of having to live at home. That would have been confusion worse confounded. No matter what sex one is, one rarely marries one's alma mater. That's incest."

"Yes, yes, I understand. Or I guess I do. But tell me what finally happened."

"What finally happened is what always finally happens. The inevitable, sometimes called mortality. My father died, leaving an estate so small that to cope with inflation we had to chop the house into four apartments and rent them to students. Then my mother died. Then — much, much later — Aunt Blanche died. I suppose I don't need to add that by this time it was too late for me."

"To late for — everything?"

"Everything." She had meant to go on sounding droll and detached, especially now, but found herself instead on the verge of an emotion suspiciously akin to self-pity, a luxury she'd never yet allowed herself. She went quickly on: "In short, I've spent seventy or so years of 'girlhood' on and off the campus of this famous midwestern college without once going to a football game or a homecoming dance. Do you know that in all that time I never once set foot in the dim and beery depths of Larry's or the Heidelberg, was never taken boating on the Olentangy in the spring, never walked with a boy down by Mirror Lake in the full of the moon? An accomplishment in itself, eh, Mr. Corey?"

"Tsk-tsk," said the visitor on the sofa, to all appearances completely overcome now by her recital.

But this was definitely not the effect she had meant her words to have. Again she had to struggle to recapture her bantering tone. "Oh, come now, Mr. Corey, don't waste your sympathy on me. Remember that all unfortunate lives have their compensations. The trouble is, I've never been able to figure out just what those compensations are in my own case. The reward I'd hoped for didn't work out. You see, I wanted to turn out to be a powerhouse of a spinster lady, the kind people invite to parties because she's witty and charming and nice to look at over the dinner table. I'm sure you'll agree I have the background and inclination for that kind of rôle, it was my looks that betrayed me. When my hair grayed it didn't go a nice puffy platinum. As you can see it's more like a bank of used steelwool. I didn't acquire that typical spinster's figure either, lean and limber and brassy as an old-fashioned curtainrod. Look at me, a hundred eighty pounds of pure flab, with round shoulders and a prolapsed belly. I don't wear these baggy sweaters and skirts with unpress-

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ed front pleats from choice. There's simply no other costume that fits. Trousers make me look like a locomotive, specifically one of the old eight-wheelers on the New York Central, huffing and chuffing and waddling along. But I'll tell you a secret, Mr. Corey. Buried deep under this gray hair, this hatchwork of wrinkles, this sagging flesh, there's a swinger who knows she was born into the wrong generation." Delly blushed again. (The blush came easier this time.) "Oh, the life I'd have if I could only be young again now, with the freedom women have now instead of the restrictions of my own times!"

Here Delly darted a sharp glance at her guest, who, for some reason, had left off looking sympathetic and instead looked uncomfortable. "Oh, dear. I've been talking too much again."

"Not at all. It's only that I still have one more question to ask before the interview is complete. I delayed asking it on purpose, hoping the answer would come out some other way, and actually it has, in a manner of speaking. Still, it's my job to ask *all* the questions on the list, though from everything you've told me so far it looks as if the answer can be only one thing, in which case you'll be in."

"'In'? You're saying I'll be accepted for recycling?"

"If you want to be."

"Then by all means let's stop beating around the bush. What is this final question?"

"Are you a maiden lady in the — ah — technical sense, Miss Rudneff?"

"*Really*, Mr. Corey!"

"I'm truly sorry, but I did warn you at the outset that some of the inquiries might be — well, objectionable, personal."

"But whatever difference could such a thing possibly make?"

"Perhaps none at all. It may be just a whim, or a requirement born of overcaution in a method of geriatric therapy which is still in infancy. No doubt many of the questions to which they insist on strict answers now will in the long run be discarded as trivial as the data grows. The point is, as of now, we have to insist on absolutely truthful answers to each question, and this is one of the questions."

When Corey had finished this uncharacteristically stiff-necked and probably memorized (she suspected) speech, a small silence seeped into the apartment and spread like an ink stain as Delly tried to think what to say. From the moment this man had convinced her he himself was a product of human recycling, whatever it was, she knew that she wanted to be accepted more than she'd ever wanted anything before. Who wouldn't want a chance to start over? But particularly, as one who'd never had much of a life in the first place, she felt she deserved it in the second, if seconds were going to be offered. She'd earned it. She was one of the unfulfilled of this world, no doubt of that.

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As for the foolish and prying "final question," it couldn't be anything but a red herring. She had already answered dozens of more bona fide questions about major illnesses and afflictions and passed with honor, since she'd never had a moment to be sick herself in her lifetime, so depended upon had she been by her valetudinarian family. What a downright fascist notion it all was anyway, this morbid preoccupation with the selection of the fittest, the most nearly whole, the "unused." Surely there were moral and social implications here that didn't bear thinking about, particularly at a time like this, when she didn't want her scruples to get in the way of her chances. If this was doublethink, then so be it. The matter was no longer an intellectual but an emotional one.

Without having raised her head to meet his eye, Delly knew intuitively that Corey, still waiting there for her answer, was convinced that the only reason she was stalling was a natural reticence in a woman of her generation and sensibilities about having to answer such a query, especially when it came from a stranger, most especially a stranger not wearing a white coat.

Actually her silence reflected a more serious dilemma. For all her sheltered life, her confinement, her almost religious renunciation, there had been an exception. But once is enough. And in this case the results had been devastating.

It had happened on a summer evening when she was already in her late thirties, after a lecture at Orton Hall, a Lamarckian giving the case against Darwin. She seldom went out in the evenings, but this program had been a requirement in one of her daytime classes. As she walked alone across the darkened Oval afterward, heading toward Woodruff Avenue, a man had come running up behind her.

Alarm changed to reassurance when she recognized him as one of the audience at the lecture, and even as someone she had seen "around" for some months, probably an instructor. As things turned out, she never really found out who he was, not in any properly articulated way. After a few formal remarks about the lecture, there was an electric pause. They had exchanged a single concentrated glance that somehow encapsulated the yearnings of each of them. She knew in that heightened moment that he was gentle, sensitive, discreet — and married. She saw that he in turn had read her message that she would capitulate this once out of her own need, but that she would never want to see him again.

And she never had. The quarter ended and he was gone. Nor was she ever able later to locate with certainty the trysting place they had chosen from among that night's deeper shadows. Any large campus traditionally landscaped offers dozens of such secret retreats, but they remain almost magically impersonal in the same way a particular hotel room may become sa-

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cred to many though it can never be identified again by any of those who have spent time there.

Improbably, even incredibly, there had been a child of that brief, enchanted union. Delly's enigmatic silence over the weeks and months led her startled and humiliated family to imagine she had been raped, and she did not correct this impression. All was handled with deft dispatch and such secrecy that even close friends never knew. In the late months she was sent away, a practical nurse taking over her family duties for a short time. She saw the baby only once, but it pleased her sense of the classic to note that, like Oedipus, he was a marked child. A little starburst of strawberry-colored tissue appeared low on the belly, just to the right of the groin.

But the scrupulously courteous Gar Corey was even yet patiently waiting. And then suddenly the wait was over; Delly's decision was made. Its rationale had in fact been forged, she realized, during that first exchange with Corey in her entrance hall. The Dorian Gray researchers had told *her* one lie, and admitted it. Surely she owed them one in return? Then the score would be even and mutual trust could be restored.

She raised her eyes to give the man on her sofa a direct, honest look. "I am a virgin," she said softly.

He responded as if she'd just kicked the final point to defeat Michigan in the game that sends a midwest team to the Rose Bowl. He leaped straight up, clicked his heels once in midair, did a fast buck and wing, tossed his notebook toward the high ceiling so that it burst in the air, riffling and sputtering like a party favor. "I *knew* you'd qualify," he congratulated her. "I was cheering for you." He grabbed her hands and dragged her up out of her chair, kissed both her sagging cheeks before she could stop him. "Goodness, Mr. Corey —"

"Call me Gar. Garfield if you like. The full name is James A. Garfield Corey. I had one brother named Benjamin Harrison Corey and another named William McKinley Corey. Father was a devout Republican. Both Harry and Mac are gone now."

"I keep forgetting how old you are. You must call me Delly. My name is Ardella but mamma was the only one who ever called me that. I've some really good sherry I've been saving for a special occasion. Will you join me?"

"*Will* I! Let's celebrate."

Delly set out her best sherry glasses and let Gar pour while she rummaged in the chimney cupboard for some imported tinned biscuits. They toasted each other and then the Dorian Gray Research Group. "If this is some kind of elaborate practical joke after all, it'd be kinder of you to tell me so now," Delly warned.

"But you must know by this time that it's serious. You'll report to the laboratories one week from today and put yourself into the hands of the staff

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for prepping. That's nothing, a series of tests, strictly controlled diet — no more than the regimen before surgery. Even the processing itself isn't bad. You're asleep for most of it."

"You mean totally unconscious?"

"Except for maybe an occasional dream. That is, some subjects dream, some don't, I'm told. I even had a few nightmares, but when you finally wake up and find out you're young again, it's worth any unpleasantness, eh?"

"I daresay. Just where are these laboratories?"

"A matter of a few hours by plane. You'll get the address and instructions by mail in a couple of days."

"And it won't cost me anything? If there's some concealed expense, then I'm afraid it won't do. I have very little income."

"No, Delly, you're performing a service for us by volunteering, since the project is still in the early experimental phase. We're not prepared to market our process yet and may not be for a long time, especially considering all the questions that'll come up, legally and otherwise, and will have to be ironed out first. For now, though, we pay all your expenses and give you a small honorarium besides. We do, however, ask you to sign a release holding Dorian Gray blameless in the highly unlikely event you might regret your decision — afterwards."

"Quite. That's only fair, I suppose. I'll sign." Delly sipped her sherry thoughtfully.

"One of the good things about you is there'll be a minimum of prep time on the psychological side. That is, you obviously have the intellect to comprehend ahead the psychological pitfalls accompanying such a rapid change and to adapt yourself to them without trauma."

"Let's hope so. There's no memory loss, is there? I'd love to be a younger me, but I wouldn't want to be reduced suddenly to the ration of knowledge I had when I was, say, twenty."

"That's one of the beauties of our system. Memory persists intact through the replay, so you can approach the problems of youth with all the resources of wisdom you've accumulated in your later years."

"And how long does the process take?"

"About two weeks from the day you come in, you'll walk out a young woman."

"How young? Do I have a choice?"

"Not a definite choice of a particular year, but if you're worrying about laboratory error, forget it. I mean, if you think some cog might slip in the machine and send you by accident back to babyhood instead of young womanhood, I assure you it can't happen."

"I'm glad of that. I wouldn't want to relive childhood. No sane person would. Those people who insist they had a happy childhood lie in their teeth."

"I guess you're right."

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"But you just mentioned a 'machine,' and that brings up another point I'd most definitely have to be assured about. Perhaps you used the word metaphorically, but to me it suggests a time machine. Now I am a very bright woman, Gar, and at my age I don't have any false modesty about saying so. I *am* quite aware that no reputable figure in scientific circles even mentions the possibility of time travel. Quite unlike space travel, it is perhaps the one device of fiction which can never become reality. Unless time itself is an illusion, but let's not get into that argument now. All I'm trying to say is, even though I know approximately what is possible, I still insist on having this point clarified. Dorian Gray doesn't achieve its recycling effects by fiddling around with time does it?"

"Certainly not."

"Because if it did, that would be the thing that would turn me off. You see, if the impossible *is* possible after all, and the clock were turned back, well, I couldn't go through it again, the business of mamma and Aunt Blanche. No matter that my aunt's illness probably began as sheer hypochondria and maybe mamma's too, they did suffer a great deal, and they both died horrible deaths, mamma from cancer and Aunt Blanche from a final stroke after she'd been paralyzed for years. It would be a monstrous cruelty for them to have to live again, and of course die again.

"But it's not just that that terrifies me. It's myself. I'd be the same person after the recycling as before, and I'd behave in the same ways. I wouldn't be able to get away the second time any more than I did the first, but the second time would be far worse because I'd *know* I wasn't going to break free ever, while during the first experience there was always at least a faint hope. Not that I didn't love my mother, my aunt too. But I hear mamma even now sometimes, in nightmares, calling, 'Ardella? Ardella? Are you there?' And of course I was always there. After all, I am a product of my time. I was reared to certain principles: a good daughter doesn't complain, doesn't behave selfishly, doesn't cheat, doesn't desert her family, doesn't even lie, unless the lies are very small and white, for liars burn forever in a special presbyterian hell." Here Delly's voice quavered and then gave out.

"Delly, Delly, have no fear. Recycling of human beings absolutely does not involve turning back time. No one now dead will be alive after your experience in the laboratory. That I promise you."

"Oh, promises! What do they mean?" The sherry seemed to have made her dizzy.

"A lot. They mean a lot to me. In fact I'd like you to make me one right now. It's highly unorthodox, against all the rules, but I'd like you to promise to spend an evening with me — after. A date, Delly? A date with me. I'll bet we'll make a very handsome couple."

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It seemed they were sitting together now on the sofa and Gar Corey had his arms around her. "You are a dear man, Gar," she said, "a very sweet person."

When Delly discovered the Dorian Gray Laboratories were in New Mexico, she at once conjured a vision of some establishment very like those beauty ranches she'd read of, where gaggles of females in various stages of deterioration are massaged, diverted, and fed satisfying meals containing scarcely a calorie while their skins, anointed with magical preparations, turn gold under the desert sun. And although she had never much liked the notion of spending time with total strangers with whom she would have little in common, she looked forward now to lying lazily around the swimming pool and exchanging pleasantries with the others in her pilot group who had also been chosen for recycling.

The reality was something else.

Her plane was met by a vigorous, genial, slightly silly woman of approximately her own age. "Dr. Rudneff? I'm Dr. Blower. It rhymes with flower, a fact that may come handy if you should happen to see my name written down. Have a good trip?"

"Well, yes, I believe so. Having never traveled before, I don't have much to compare it with. Never thought I'd ever get on a plane. In my girlhood it wasn't a common mode of travel, and then more recently I've had nowhere I particularly wanted to go."

"That will all change radically soon," the woman predicted briskly, tucking Delly's unfashionable suitcase into the rear of a late-model station wagon and getting behind the wheel.

This Dr. Blower had ruddy cheeks and a short-cut coiffure of the same platinum-gray hue Delly had always wistfully admired. "Are you one of the researchers then? A gerontologist?"

"Yes to the first question. No to the second. I'm a biochemist. Our operation here has many aspects, as you may imagine. More to the point, though, I'm your staff contact for the two weeks you'll be with us. The human element is considered very important to our work."

"I should *think* so," agreed Delly.

"We assign staff members to subjects on a one-to-one basis. It helps dispel the loneliness of the waiting."

"Loneliness? I thought a number of us were participating?

"Five this time. But we don't permit socializing. We've found it's best if you remain totally apart from one another. But you'll see in a few minutes."

And Delly did. The station wagon set off at an improbable speed over a desert superhighway and after half an hour drew up in a quiet courtyard around which lay a scattering of low, gray adobe buildings. It was evening, with the light beginning a soft withdrawal. There seemed no one about but themselves. As she followed Dr.

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Blower through the grounds and corridors, Delly was pleased by the exuberance of bloom — bedded flowers, blossoming small trees, espaliered shrubs, and potted plants — and by the sight of secluded stone benches and small, fountain-centered interior patios, and sudden vistas of distant mountains through open gates and deep windows. A place right out of *Death Comes for the Archbishop*, Delly thought. She looked forward to exploring her romantic surroundings in the morning.

Even that prospect was dashed, however, when Dr. Blower guided her at last into the room Delly was to occupy and explained in her sprightly way, "This may strike you as strange hospitality, but we have strict rules to prevent our guests from moving about unattended. You'll be comfortable here tonight, breakfast will arrive whenever you signal for it on the intercom, and tomorrow afternoon we'll begin the preparation for processing. Meanwhile, if there's anything else you need, speak up. You are not, however, expected to leave the room. Good luck, Dr. Rudneff. Glad to have you aboard." She seized Delly's hand, shook it with girl scout heartiness, and was gone.

Delly immediately tried the door. When she found it either locked or stuck shut, she told herself it was no more than she might have expected after Dr. Blower's odd warnings. She decided to read awhile and then go to bed, which was precisely what she would have done even if the door had yielded. For the reward the organization offered, she would put up with any of its crotchets.

At least the room was pleasant. Two grilled windows gave on one of the floral scenes she had already glimpsed, and on the opposite wall a trio of O'Keeffe prints joyously held a mirror up to life. A deep chair huddled ready under a reading lamp, and an end wall was nearly covered with shelved books. Delly cast an eye over these, and then settled down quite contentedly to review the *Letters of Mme. de Sévigné*.

That evening marked the last experience of coherence Delly was to enjoy for a long time, the last interval in which she was really sure of anything. There must have been a drug in the breakfast coffee the following morning, she was to realize later, for afterward she fell into shadowy sleep and immediately became a much younger woman.

Her name was not Ardella, however, but Marie, and she lived in seventeenth-century France. It was that kind of dream in which the dreamer knows he is dreaming, and can speculate upon — though not control — events. At first she was overjoyed by her maidenly figure, clad only in a shift, and wondered how she was to go about finding the gowns and jewelry she would require for her presumed role as one of the planets around the Sun King in the palace at Versailles.

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Yet she knew at once that this presumption was a mistaken one, for the room she found herself in was no luxurious boudoir of an upper-class French woman but a plain, bare cell with a tiny high window. Moreover, the garment she had taken to be a shift began to feel stiff and coarse against her bare skin as she moved around. It was then she knew — as anxiety mounted — that it was no shift but a sanbenito.

Just her luck! Marie was on the "wrong" side. One of the persecuted Calvinists instead of an emperor's favorite. Words had been scrawled in scarlet dye across the rough brown fabric of her hideous smock. No, not words, but the same word written three times. She was unsurprised, reading upside down, at the: *Hérétique! Hérétique! Hérétique!* Unsurprised again when a sudden puff of oily black smoke swept through the high window, swirling down into the cell, making her eyes smart. She could imagine the bundles of fagots being tossed onto the enormous fire in the public square outside; she could hear shouting.

But this *must not happen,* Marie thought frantically. She was a young woman and she would not be cheated of her life by one of history's senseless religious persecutions. It occurred to her that she wasn't even sure what particular heresy she was about to be executed for. Her alter ego, Ardella the scholar, had jumped to the conclusion that she was a Calvinist after the revocation of the Edict of Nantes. But it could as easily be that this was not the seventeenth century but the twelfth or thirteenth and she was a Waldensian. Or for that matter an Albegensian, a Pelagian, a Hussite!

That, however, was no longer important from the moment she heard their boots in the corridor. Desperately, remembering she hadn't yet tried the door, she threw herself upon the heavy wooden portal. But her guards were already on the other side thrusting the door against her struggling body. On the stone floor of the dungeon two of them held her while a third brushed the sanbenito aside and raped her. She screamed; the trio laughed. Her struggles were brutally quelled by the blows which fell about her head and torso, scattering her teeth, caving in her ribs, spilling her youthful blood in rivulets which flowed down the corridor and into the square as far as the blazing pile onto which the broken young body was finally thrown.

Delly half woke to find herself sweating heavily. People were moving around her bed. Someone swabbed at her face with a cool cloth. Sleep came again without her having discovered what day it was or indeed if it were day or night. Some unfamiliar voice occasionally exhorted or reassured her, but the exact words were lost. When next she opened her eyes, it was to recognize the ruddy, glowing face of Dr. Blower, but almost at once it began a Cheshire cat withdrawal till only the

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jaunty smile remained.

And then she was awake, fully awake, on a deliriously fragrant spring evening in a high meadow with a few stars erupting from a darkening purple sky. There was activity around her, a highly organized effort with many young people taking part, singing and chanting as they moved.

When she sat up she realized that part of the fragrance was coming from herself. She was literally covered with garlands of wildfloweres. They crowned her head, twined through her long and glossy dark hair, depended from her neck, and circled her narrow waist, wrists, bare ankles.

It was as she was examining the peculiar, lurching gait of the young people, who had begun to dance around their bonfire, that she experienced a thrilling shock of recognition. The Old Religion. This must be Scotland, some spot remote from civilization on an uninhabited moor perhaps, and this was a Beltane fire.

Indeed everything was being done in the prescribed way. The fire, fed from an enormous pile of furze nearby, burned on a raised mesa of turf left in the middle of a square trench. Dangling from a high scaffold at the edge of the circle of firelight was an ugly effigy at least twenty feet tall made of wicker with a hollow interior.

A vagrant wind whipped the fire to a brisker blaze, and the chanting and dancing suddenly took on a new frenzy. Though the words were plainly not English and she knew no Celtic, she had not much difficulty in picking out the message after a time. Fiona the Witch. They were going to burn Fiona the Witch, whoever she was. The effigy, of course. At the climax of the ritual the wicker figure would be cast into the fire as surrogate for the Beltane carline, or human sacrifice. For this would be after the era in which real human victims were sacrificed by the Druids to Baal to insure abundant crops in the coming season. It wouldn't be long now, either, before the sacrifice took place, she thought, for the chant, like a mantra, had already taken on more than its original meaning, become a force in itself. Soon the accumulating psychic energy would explode into some primitive and uncontrollable action.

Much as she wanted to witness this action, she was aware of the hazards to an outsider at a secret ritual. Did they know she was there? Should she try to leave while their attention was still on the fire dance? She would surely not be missed since she was not actually part of the ceremony. Or was she? She was set apart both by her attire — the flowers and a white gauze gown; the others wore far more rustic clothing — and a physical distance of some fifty feet from the dancing circle. Yet this apartness might signify that she was a priestess of the cult. Or a prophetess. (Would she be able, if required, to tell the future from the entrails of a hedgehog, or would she have to fake it?)

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Enclosed in these whimsical speculations, she saw too late that she had been right: she *was* a part of the ritual. Fear took hold of her heart and seemed to squeeze it dry, leaving her limp, unable to move. She screamed when the line of young people began wending toward her, screamed again when the first dancer put a hot hand on her arm, dragging her up. And went on screaming when she found herself borne along by the shouting group toward the wicker figure which swayed menacingly in the night wind.

They detached it from its scaffold and laid it on its side while they thrust her through the hole left in the top. She screamed steadily and tried to break her way through the plaited osiers, but they were tough as the iron bars of a cage. Still screaming, she saw everything through her wicker lattice, their enthralled, demented faces, open shouting mouths, straining limbs as they tossed more furze on the fire and toppled the effigy, no longer empty, after it....

One morning she woke in her own room at the laboratories feeling light all over. Her head was clear enough for her to realize the effect of lightness wasn't from drugs alone. Sure enough, by dragging herself — she was extremely weak — to the scales in the tiny bathroom she discovered that her hated thirty pounds of overweight had melted away and five more with them.

Dr. Blower came in. "Glad you're feeling well enough to be up. No, don't go looking into that mirror. The real miracle hasn't happened yet. That's the next step, phase two."

"What happened to phase one?" Delly asked meekly.

"You slept through most of it, but we've been busy. Everything's going splendidly. It appears you'll finish the course with honor, maybe even a summa cum." Dr. Blower laughed blithely and added, "I do want to caution you that the sense of displacement will intensify during the latter half of the treatment. You'll continue to lose track of time. If the condition persists into the recuperation phase, you may want to remain here a few days longer than normal or perhaps have one of us accompany you home, to your own house. We will not abandon you, of course, until we're satisfied you're perfectly adjusted to being the far younger person you will become."

Delly wanted to ask the biochemist why, if the treatment were so great, Dr. Blower herself hadn't undergone the process, but she felt weary and tongue-tied and was convinced in advance the answer would only be that Dr. Blower had such a busy schedule that she simply hadn't been able to work the treatment in.

Meanwhile, her thoughts were mostly on what Dr. Blower had said about completing Delly's experience with honor and getting her home. Home. The first thing she'd do when she arrived, Delly thought, would be to throw away all her baggy sweaters

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and the awful serge skirts. The next thing would be to begin answering some of the other ads in the book review, the kind in which sensitive mature men with an appreciation of baroque music and rare wines advertised for intellectual young women with a wry, sardonic, offbeat sense of humor, interested in ideas, serene living, and imaginative love. Object: dichotomy. (*Mature* men — at least in their forties — for Delly realized already that if she kept the same mind after achieving the younger body, she'd never be satisfied with any boyish, self-centered youth, no matter how charming. Unless of course that youth were someone like Gar Corey, who was in actuality older than herself.)

Phase two of Delly's treatment went much as Dr. Blower predicted. Hours of semiconsciousness passed over her head like minutes; days continued to be misplaced. And there were more of the nightmares. Once she was aware of being levered into a metal tube, something like an iron lung; it reminded her so forcibly of Fiona's experience of being thrust into the wicker effigy that she screamed and tried to fight off the medical attendants surrounding her. Or perhaps she only imagined she screamed and struggled, for almost at once she was aware of a perfect stillness and a perfect absence of light. She floated in nothing, and nothing moved anywhere.

Why, I must be dead, she thought reasonably. Something went wrong with the treatment after all. But she had no sooner convinced herself of this than a brilliant crack appeared in the immense darkness surrounding her. It widened and widened until it seemed she was falling out of night onto the surface of the sun. Voices came to her as if through water: "All aboard!" "Watch your step, please." "That'll be fifty cents, sir. Hope you and the lady had a good trip."

She and Gar were standing on Woodruff Avenue at the familiar corner of the block where her house was. They had evidently just stepped out of a taxi. Well, Dorian Gray had promised to watch over her until she was able to handle the change. And she was glad they had assigned Gar, her old friend, to the job of escort.

"Thanks, Garfield, for seeing me home. But I'm quite all right now and won't need to take up more of your time."

He set down her suitcase and took both her hands in his, looking sincerely down at her. "Ah, Delly, you can't get rid of me so easily. I mean to see you *all* the way home. Don't you remember our date?"

"Our date? Oh, yes, of course I do. But —"

He tilted up her chin and kissed her in a persistent way. "Well, it came true, what I predicted. We really do make a very handsome couple."

He took her arm and they began to walk the last few steps toward her house. It was late afternoon, the sun

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mellowing. She was glad after all that Gar hadn't abandoned her there on the corner. Despite her show of independence, it was becoming increasingly obvious that she was still under the influence of some medication because things did not look quite right. That is, they looked almost right, but not quite.

Across the street, for instance, the new Shangri La apartment house (built in the fifties, but still referred to as "new" by Delly and her older neighbors) was missing, or the illusion induced by the medicine made it *seem* to be. Could there have been a fire while she was away? Where the Shangri La was supposed to be there was now only a vacancy between two elderly dwellings of familiar, dark-red native sandstone, as if a sound new tooth had been mistakenly extracted from between two carious ones.

But what did she care about any of this when the far more important thing that had happened to her remained to be savored? This was definitely Woodruff Avenue; so the recycling had been completed and she had been delivered home. A handsome couple, Gar had said. A very handsome couple. Was there a mirror in her purse? No, better wait till she was safely in her apartment, not make a public spectacle of herself. Anyway she had already seen in Gar's eyes that she was indeed young again, beautiful again. Meanwhile she raised an ungloved hand to her own eyes and studied it. The liver-spots, the scar from the wart she'd had removed two years ago — all gone. It was the hand of a young person.

Next she raised the hand carefully to her cheek, which was smooth as a fresh apricot, no wrinkles, dewlaps, moles, wens, or prickles of vagrant hair. Evidently aware of her thoughts, he smiled down at her again. "Oh, hurry, Gar. Let's go in. I want to see for myself." She already had her front-door key out and in a moment was fitting it into the lock, using those lovely, unmarked, tapering fingers.

Preoccupied with her joy, she went straight to her room, hardly stopping to notice that they were rushing up to the second floor of a family home not yet turned into four apartments.

Gar stayed at her side, laughed with her over the glorious image the mirror gave back. When she could bring herself to turn away, he gathered her into his arms. It was in the middle of a long kiss that the voice came floating to them from down the hall. "Ardella? Ardella? Are you there?"

It took Delly several long moments of marshalling all her resources to be able to choke out the only possible answer. "Yes, mamma. I'm here."

"Are you awake, Dr. Rudneff?"

"I think so. But I'm never quite sure any more. I thought I was awake just now and had gone back home to Woodruff Avenue, but it seems that was a dream like all the others, and a good thing too."

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"Well, the deed is done. Your recycling is complete. But there's something I must tell you before you look at a mirror." For the first time in their short acquaintance Dr. Blower failed to meet Delly's eye.

"Don't tell me your recycling didn't work on me."

"Oh, it's not that. It's merely that we can't guarantee specifics at this stage in our research. And as we all know, every human being is an idiosyncratic organism which may react in unique and often unpredictable ways to given stimuli."

"Ah, so it's something utterly unspeakable. Like *Lost Horizon?* So long as I stay here in New Mexico I'm sweet twenty-one, but if I try to leave — poof! I'm a withered crone with snaggled incisors and a witch cackle. Or is it —? Of course! A sex change. As a young man I shall have to change my name to Adelbert. Dell for short."

Dr. Blower looked shocked. "Come now, nothing's so bad as all that, though I suppose it should be reassuring to us that you can make jokes about it. The fact is that you had every right to expect — and we encouraged you to believe — that you'd emerge in your early twenties. As it turns out, you're for all practical purposes now a woman in her mid to late thirties, bordering woefully close to forty. I'm sorry."

Delly sat up straight. "Is *that* all?"

"You mean you don't mind?"

"Why should I mind? Did you think I was greedy, Dr. Blower? Or vain? And isn't everything in life a compromise? There's plenty a woman between thirty and forty can do to fulfill her life if she has a little gumption and imagination, especially if she doesn't waste time." Delly laughed in anticipation. But after a moment she added thoughtfully, "Speaking of time, it *is* still the same year I came here, isn't it? No tricks?"

Dr. Blower bristled. "Don't be absurd. We're a reputable organization."

Luggage packed, waiting in the sunny front patio of the Dorian Gray Laboratories to be taken to her plane on a morning so bright with reality that she knew beyond doubt it could be no dream this time, Delly foresaw how her life would go from now on.

She would be able to do anything — anything except shuck off her essential morally conservative nature. For despite technical advances we remain victims of our own times and of ourselves.

Having missed love before, she might indeed have love affairs. But as each one of these ripened toward consummation, she would know an awesome fear for the starburst birthmark that could show up low on the belly, just to the right of the groin, of whatever charming, mature, witty partner had found her favor.

An absurd fear, as many fears are; the chances of her ever seeing that mark were statistically minuscule, al-

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most nonexistent. Yet it was an inescapable fact that her own son would now be at that age in life from which she would choose her suitors.

The foolish requirement of virginity, guaranteeing the experimenters a subject with no issue, had been exacted so as to avoid precisely this kind of situation. In being less than truthful with Dorian Gray, she had created her own punishment.

Suddenly Delly smiled, for there was a kind of beauty in what had happened, the symmetry of paradox which might have been lost on a sinner less astute and prepared than she.

She was still smiling when Dr. Blower bounced up, jingling the keys to the station wagon. "Ah, dear Dr. Rudneff, shall we go? You're looking extremely fit this morning, for which I take my share of credit. All ready to begin your new life?"

"Quite ready and willing," Delly agreed. "Sooner the better." With no hesitation she picked up her bag and proceeded toward her commencement.

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F&SF Competition

REPORT ON COMPETITION 24

In our February issue we asked competitors to submit author/title misprints caused by the addition of one letter. The response was terrific, and many seemed to think that this was an easy one. However, as you old-timers know, the snag in a comp like this is the large numbers of repeats. The trick is to stay away from obvious entries, no matter how good. Among the most repeated titles were: The Lather of Heaven, Strange Whine, Sox (Lox, Pox), The Female Moan, Spock Must Diet!, Hi, Robot, The Stairs My Destination, Rendezvous With Grama, Bill, the Galactic Heron and — most repeated of all — The Motel In God's Eye.

We picked the winners by the overall quality of all their entries; most of the winners included some repeats.

FIRST PRIZE

Asimov's *Oi, Robot*
Del Rey's *Gnerves*
Capek's *W.R.U.R.*
Budrys's *Whom?*
Brunner's *The Squarest of the City*
Biggle's *The Still, Small Voice of Strumpets*

—Daniel P. Dern
Brighton, Mass.

SECOND PRIZE

Lafferty's *The Flambé Is Green*
Laumer's *Retief Ate Large*
Leiber's *Ill Meat in Lankhmar*
Pohl's *Gladiator-at-Slaw*
Russ's *And Chaos Dined*

—Tad Turner
New Orleans, La.

RUNNERS UP

Blish's *The Tissue at Hand*
Carter's *The Man Who Loved Mares*
Porges's *The Bruum*
Varley's *In the Bowel*

—Mario Milosevic
Waterloo, Ont. Canada

Tiptree's *Urp the Walls of the World*
Knight's *Ha for Anything*
MacDonald's *Swine of the Dreamers*
Sturgeon's *The Man Who Lost the Seat*

—Susan Milmore
New York, NY

Rotsler's *Patron of the Tarts*
Tenn's *On Venus, Have We Got A Rabbit*
Bester's *The Four Hour Fudge*
McCaffrey's *Dragonslinger*

—Michael J. Padgett Jr.
Atlanta, Ga.

Gerrold's *When Harlie Wags One*
Davidson's *Oar All the Seas With Oysters*
Haldeman's *All My Skins Remembered*

—Ken Ringlein
Lincoln, Ne.

Dick's *Dog Androids Dream of Electric Sheep*
McIntyre's *Of Misty and Grass and Sand*

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Moore's *What Happened to Emily Goode After the Great Sexhibition*
—Wanda R. Wolfe
Biloxi, Ms.

Haldeman's *All My Sinks Remembered*
Lafferty's *Continued on Next Frock*
Delany's *The Feinstein Intersection*
Delany's *No Ova*
—Jeff Grimshaw
New York, NY

Zelazny's *To Dine In Italbar*
Ellison's *The Least Dangerous Visions*
Heinlein's *Fall, You Zombies*
Cowper's *Drink Men, Francesca*
—James C. Knittel
Prior Lake, Minn.

Leiber's *I'll Meet in Lankhmar*
Bradbury's *Mary's Is Heaven*
Vance's *The Moon Mouth*
—*David Finkelstein*
Old San Juan, PR

Delany & Hacker's *Squark #1*
Blish's *Jack of Beagles*
Kotzwinkle's *Doctor Drat*
—*Augustine Funnell*
Perth, Ont. Canada

COMPETITION 25

For Competition 25, we ask readers to send in a short poem or limerick about a fantastic or science fictional *animal*. For inspiration, please turn to the poem by Tom Disch on page 136.

Rules: Send entries to Competition Editor, F&SF, Box 56, Cornwall, Conn. 06753. Entries must be received by June 15. Judges are the editors of F&SF; their decision is final. All entries become the property of F&SF; none can be returned.

Prizes: First prize, six different hard cover science fiction books. Second prize, 20 different sf paperbacks, Runners-up will receive one-year subscriptions to F&SF. Results of Competition 25 will appear in the October Issue.

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You get 2 Selections every month at up to 65% off publishers' prices. About every 4 weeks (14 times a year), we'll send you the Club's bulletin, *Things to Come*, describing the 2 coming Selections and a variety of Alternate choices. If you want both Selections, you need do nothing; they'll be shipped automatically. If you don't want a Selection, or prefer an Alternate, or no book at all, just fill out the convenient form always provided, and return it to us by the date specified. We allow you at least 10 days for making your decisions. If you don't receive the form in time to respond within 10 days and receive an unwanted Selection, you may return it at our expense.

As a member you need take only 4 Selections or Alternates during the coming year. You may resign any time thereafter, or remain a member as long as you wish. One of the two Selections each month is only $2.49. Other Selections are slightly higher, but always much less than hardcover Publishers' Editions. A shipping and handling charge is added to each shipment. Send no money. But do send

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